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Rethinking Reviews

The world of games is always changing, and the way we review them has to change as well. Behind the scenes, we have been working on a new way to handle reviews, while still keeping the core components that make *Game Informer* reviews, well, *Game Informer* reviews.

At the core of these changes is finding a way to cover and score games that interest you, or more directly, are looking to take money out of your wallet.

When Minecraft launched in 2009, it was one of the first games that released as an alpha and slowly moved toward launch almost two and a half years later. It was fun, and we discussed it as one of our Top 50 games of that year, but held back because the game was officially in "alpha" and wasn't a final product. We wanted to be fair to the developers so their game was reviewed and judged in its final form. The rest of the story is well known: Minecraft became a cultural phenomenon, and we didn't review it until a review didn't matter anymore other than us putting on record that the game was – surprise! – a lot of fun.

More games started taking the "Early Access" approach, charging players for the chance to be a part of the game's creation, driven in part by player feedback. But somewhere along the line, these Early Access games were no longer just works in progress; they were products (incomplete or not) demanding players' time and money.

Games like Fortnite are now on Season 5 yet still haven't left Early Access, and many other titles are always "in progress" or continually changing with updates and patches happening at lightning speed.

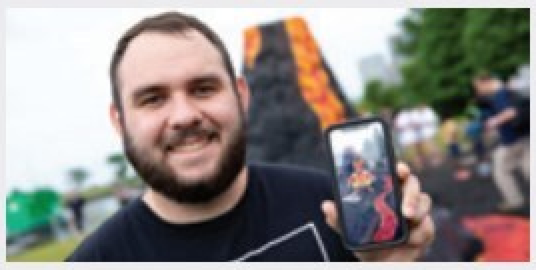
We feel labels like Early Access, Open Beta, and Game Preview can be used as shields for poor production (or are straight-up marketing), so going forward we are taking the stance that if a game is monetized, it is open to critique. Yes, there will be exceptions, and yes there are games that use Early Access as intended, but at this point we need to find new ways to inform gamers.

Part of the new review process we are designing will enable us to update these reviews as the games evolve, but for now we can't ignore the games out there any longer. As such, we are reviewing a couple of games this month that aren't officially "out" because we want to allow our readers to make the best decisions with their money regardless of some arbitrary and inconsistent label.

Cheers,

44 Assassin's Creed Odyssey

With Odyssey, Ubisoft Quebec is getting closer to the studio's goal of bringing full RPG gameplay to the Assassin's Creed series. See what's in store for players in October in our extensive cover story. ***by Jeff Cork***



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After 2017's disastrous festival, we were surprised Niantic was eager to try again.

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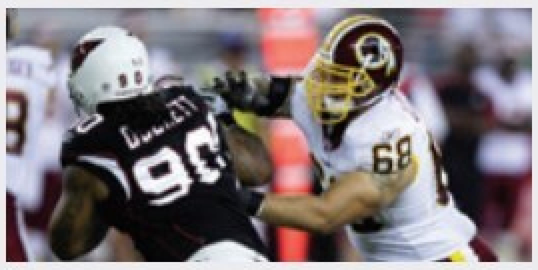
We talked to Blizzard about what goes into creating Overwatch's characters.



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We spoke with retired professional athletes who have successfully moved on to new careers as game developers.

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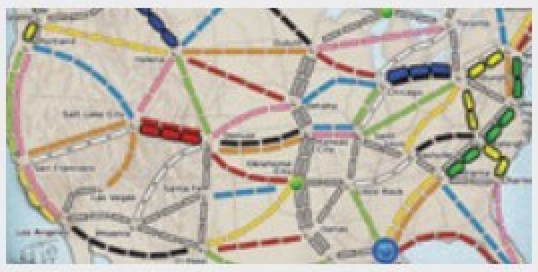
A huge pillar of the success of Pokémon belongs to the trading card game. We visited Creatures in Japan, the studio that creates the game and its affiliated art, to learn about its history.



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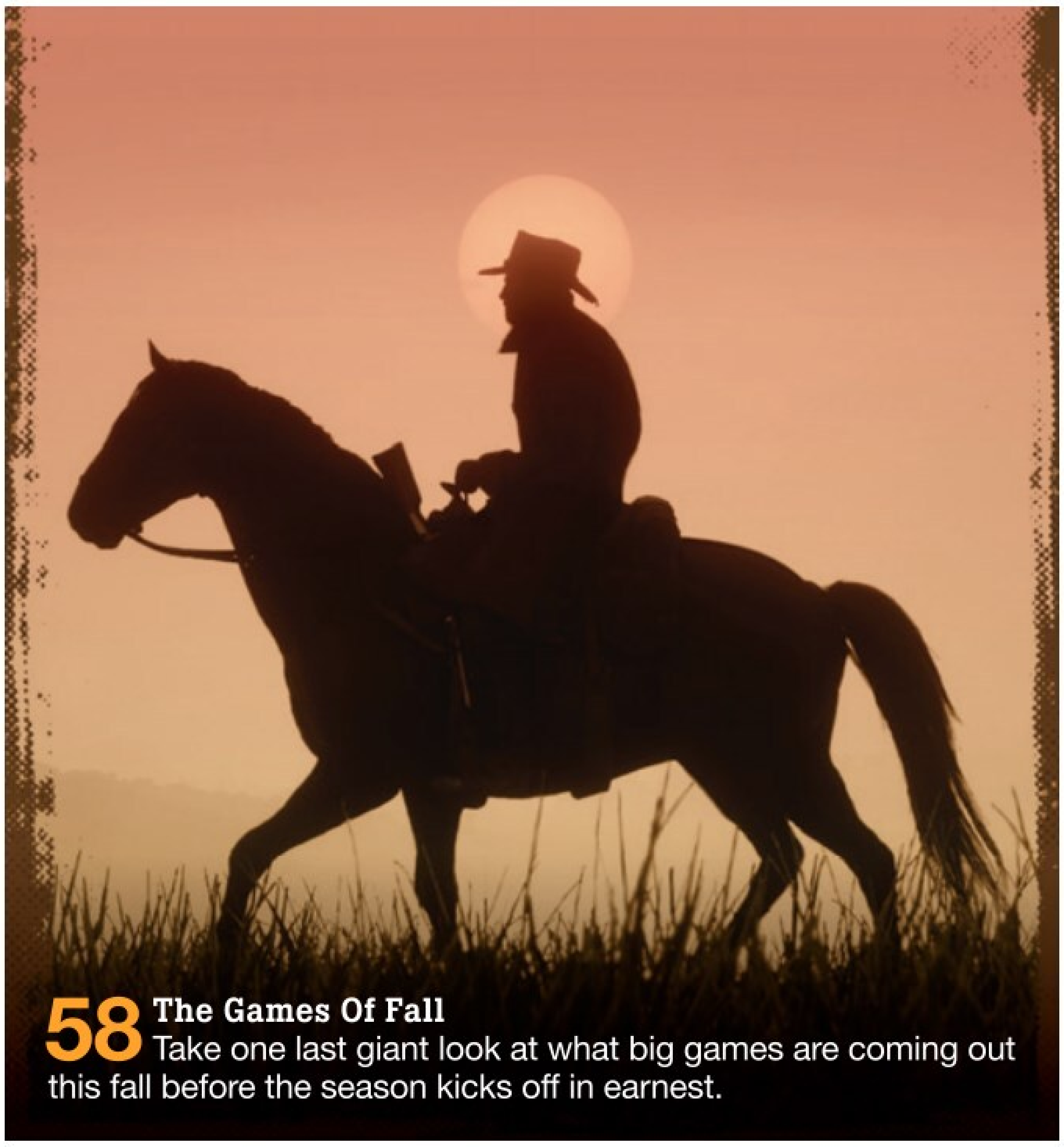

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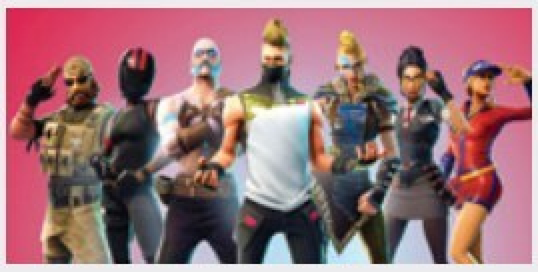

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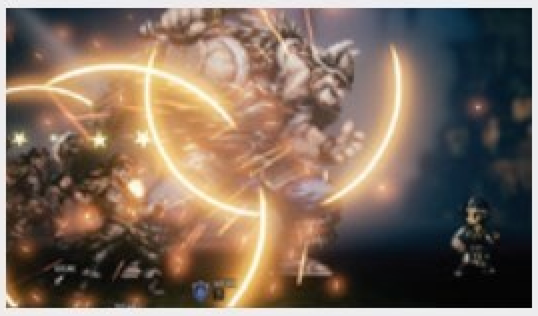
If you're a breathing person, then you know about Fortnite. But now you get to know what we think of it!



91 Octopath Traveler
Fans of old-school, pixel art, turn-based RPGs shouldn't skip Octopath Traveler on Switch.

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feedback

Readers seemed cautiously optimistic for Anthem this month, and unabashedly pessimistic for Call Of Duty. We also heard from some surprisingly polite 12-year-olds – way to be civil, kids!

Anticipating Anthem

After reading the Anthem cover story (issue 303), I think BioWare might be onto something. I've always been a fan of first- and third-person shooters and I've always hoped for a good open-world shooter with features similar to RPGs. I'm not a huge fan of blood and gore, which is why I mostly stuck to Destiny and Destiny 2, though they've lost their appeal over the years. That's why I'm hoping Anthem will be a decent game – I'm very interested in the Storm Javelin!

Elijah Alexander
via email

After Mass Effect: Andromeda, the prospect of BioWare moving even further out of its comfort zone might be disconcerting for long-time fans. However, we've liked what we've played so far – in large part thanks to those Iron Man-esque Javelin suits. Learn loads more about Anthem by checking out our month of bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/anthem.

Careful What You Wish For

So I just read in this month's issue that the new Call of Duty will not have a single-player campaign. Are you serious?! The campaign is what started this franchise and made it such a juggernaut! I understand that times change and gamers want new things, but cutting something that big is just stupid. Why on earth would you risk alienating/losing so many fans of the series? If I wanted to play a battle royale, I would just play Fortnite. I know Battlefield One didn't have a traditional single-player campaign, but it was better than nothing. Rest in peace, Call of Duty.

Chris Pertuset
via email

So I just read your Black Ops 4 preview (issue 304) – WTF is with the no campaign? That makes me angry at both Treyarch and Activision because Black Ops has the best campaign in COD history. I read on thinking it must be a multiplayer campaign instead, but to my surprise (well, not that much of a surprise), it's a battle royale mode. At that moment I realized COD is dead, which I've been saying since Infinite Warfare was announced. So what do you guys think?

Diana Elliott
via email

Call of Duty's naysayers have been demanding drastic changes to the series for years now (long before Infinite Warfare, as a matter of fact), and this year's installment is delivering for better or worse. While axing the campaign may not be what fans were expecting, you can't blame Treyarch for favoring its own wildly popular Zombies mode and competitive multiplayer instead. Whether COD's experiment with battle royale will pay off remains to be seen, but we're sticking to last month's assertion that we do actually have to SEE it (not to mention play it) before trying to pass judgment on the fate of the franchise.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Gratitude For Gaming

Many thanks for your feature on gaming in the military (Coping With War, issue 303). To be frank, I was concerned it would be a glorified puff piece on game companies supporting veterans and servicemembers, as sadly in my 15 years of ongoing active duty service I've had firsthand experience with businesses using the military as free PR. However, your focus remained steady on the servicemembers, people like me who have passed many a late night or early morning on the other side of the planet huddled together around a television playing games. I came home from my most recent deployment three days ago, and my Nintendo Switch was a valuable icebreaker for getting to know people on the mission – unlike a typical deployment, we were all put together from different commands and sent out as a team, so we were all the new guy on the ship. Not being terribly social, I found out who else had a Switch, and we were able to gravitate towards each other and build a camaraderie. I also can't imagine the hell of physically not being able to unwind with a video game at the end of a long day, so publishing Mary Dague's account of how she games without the use of her hands was most appreciated. The cliché is that "All servicemembers gave some and some servicemembers gave all," but it's critical to acknowledge that first "some" is not equally weighed out.

Byron C. Linder
via email

Kid Tested, G.I. Approved

I am a 12-year-old boy living in El Dorado Hills. I like to play video games, but I don't like the mature content in some games. I think you should try to promote games that aren't rated M, because of their family-friendly content. I am sure others like me agree.

Andrew Casper
El Dorado Hills, CA

I'm assuming most of you at G.I. probably grew up gaming, which means at some point you were 12 years old (like me now!) and weren't allowed to play games like Doom and Duke Nukem 3D (or GTA for me), but felt you were too old to play kids games. This is a terrible time for someone like me, where tons of masterpieces are being released, but they're all too inappropriate for me to play. Are there any amazing (preferably open-world) games that you think I could play and would enjoy? I'm allowed to play T-rated games. Also, I completed Breath of the Wild 100-percent, so not that game. If you want to spur my parents in the right direction and suggest GTA V, it would make my life a lot happier.

Gable Coe
via email

Sorry, Gable – while we appreciate your polite and honest inquiry, GTA V is *super* not appropriate for 12-year-olds. However, you and your parents should vet Horizon Zero Dawn, Monster Hunter: World, Infamous: Second Son, and the Arkham series. They're all fantastic open-world games that sport a Teen rating. Spider-Man will also likely fit the bill in a few months, and is shaping up to be a GOTY contender.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"When is Blizzard finally gonna give fans what they want and support cross-console play?"

When Sony allows it, maybe?

"Will you guys be making a Dark Mode for the new website?"

Yep! In the meantime, feel free to use your light switch as a free alternative.

"Does 'Question Of The Month' ever get answered?"

You're one page away from finding out!

Reader Gibberish:

"I wander how to get the proper download links for naruto"

Question Of The Month:

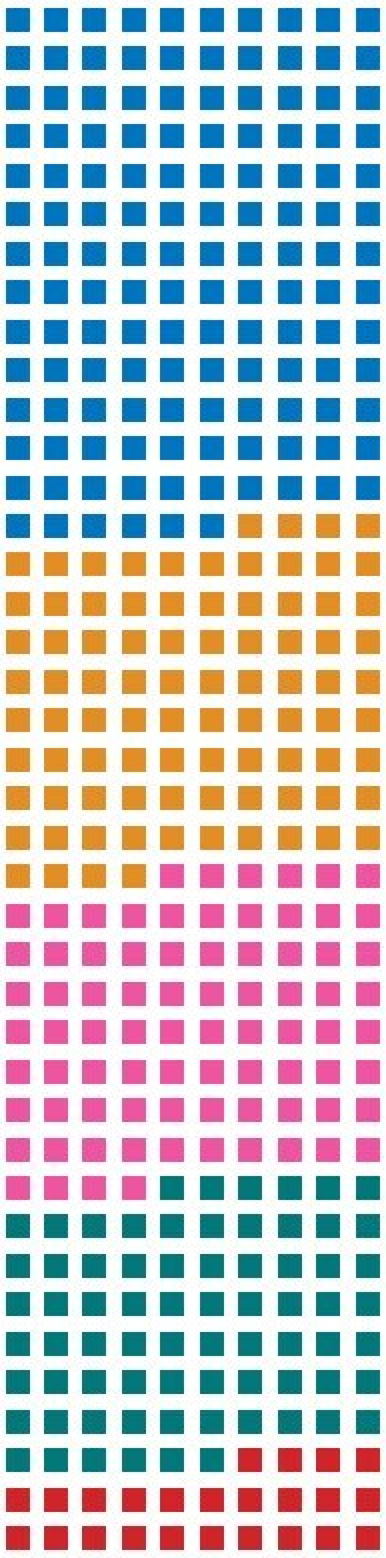
If you could design your own old-school video game mascot, what animal would it be and what would you name it?

gi spy

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(Left) Not only did the fine folks at Ubisoft Quebec give us a detailed look at Assassin's Creed Odyssey this month, they also put up with all our corny 300 jokes. Thanks, guys!
(Right) Things got decidedly unserious when Reeves met up with Serious Sam voice actor John J. Dick at E3. "Unserious" is a word, right?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Best Video Game Explosions
- 🟧 "No COD Campaign?!"
- 🟪 Anthem Excitement
- 🟩 Senior Gamers Represent!
- 🟥 "Where The Nintendo Games At?"

Ka-Boom

In issue 303, we asked readers what video game has the best explosions. Sadly, no one gave the correct answer of Red Faction: Guerilla. These responses received half-credit, at least.

It has to be the Just Cause series, hands down. There is nothing like flying a jet or a copter and watching an entire island explode. I can't wait for Just Cause 4 – I can only imagine the tomfoolery that awaits.

Jeremy Amacher

I think Infamous: Second Son has some of the best explosions I've ever seen. The particle effects and the mix of neon/fire/pixels made it so vibrant, it was like playing a painting!

Joey Robinson

I didn't even think twice about picking Fallout 4. Just the sheer beauty of the new engine makes the explosions look absolutely stunning. Every time I see a mini-nuke fly through the sky, I know I'm in for an amazing boom.

Miguel Carriedo IV

Oddly enough, my answer would go not to some epic action game, but to Mario And Luigi: Partners In Time. The bosses in the game took forever for my nine-year-old self to beat, but as soon as you chip away that last hit point, they start glowing and burst into a flurry of stars and shockwaves. Immensely satisfying.

Noah Mamet

The State Of State Of Decay 2

I just finished reading your review for State Of Decay 2 and I couldn't disagree more. Many of the issues that were brought up have either been fixed or don't happen as often. I play the game online with my friends and we've hardly had a problem with anything. The game is gorgeous at times and with all the variety it offers, I have a hard time believing it's a 6.5. I hope you give it another play and maybe even reconsider the score you gave it as this game deserves better.

Tanner Siegal
via email

Your State of Decay 2 review was spot-on. Just last night I emailed Undead Labs after I had logged in to continue building my community, only to find that my war wagon – the vehicle I had spent many repair kits and influence points (not to mention time!) on to hulk it up and prepare for the zombie apocalypse – was gone. Not destroyed, not parked across the street. Gone. My email could basically be summarized as, "Great game, BUT…" After emailing them, I read your review; it was almost word for word the same. For a game that's so brutal with its permadeath mechanics, it's hard to imagine sinking my few free hours into something so unpredictable. I'll come back after a few updates.

Doug A.
via email

There have indeed been a number of patches for State of Decay 2, including a hefty 20 GB update at the beginning of June. However, that doesn't change our (or anyone else's) experience with the game at launch, which is what our review encapsulates. That may seem unfair given the improvements Undead Labs has made since then, but there's a surefire way for developers to avoid this kind of predicament – don't release a glitch-filled game in the first place.

UPER
SH BROS.
CHALLENGER APPROACHING

The GAME INFORMER SHOW

(Left) Nintendo's Bill Trinen and Nate Bihldorff were all smiles at this year's E3. Super Smash Bros. has that effect on people. **(Right)** Fiftycc's Lizzie Ceuvas and Games Done Quick's Kasumi "sumichu" Yogi dropped by the office to chat about speedrunning.

(continued on page 8)

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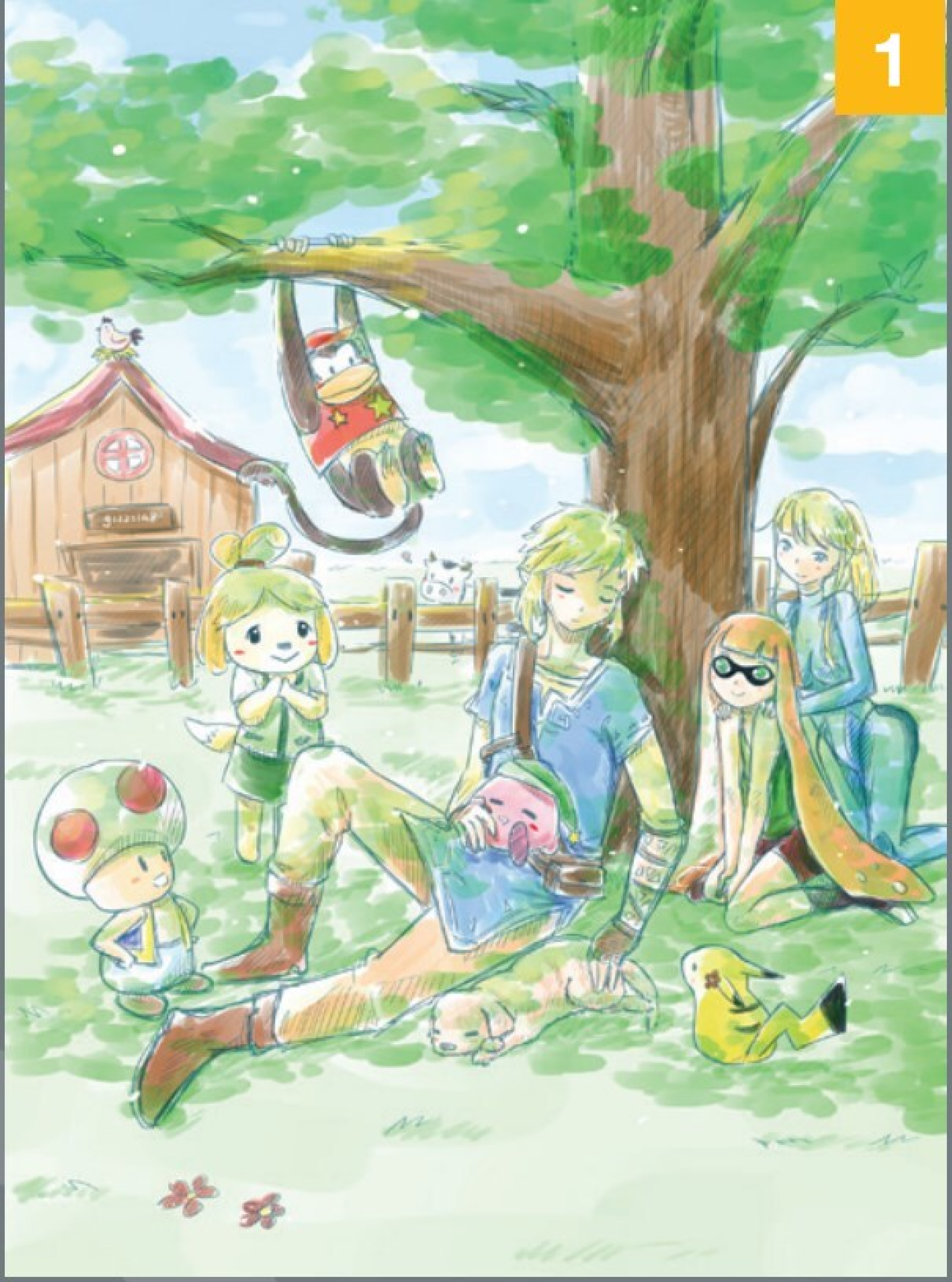
gallery



1

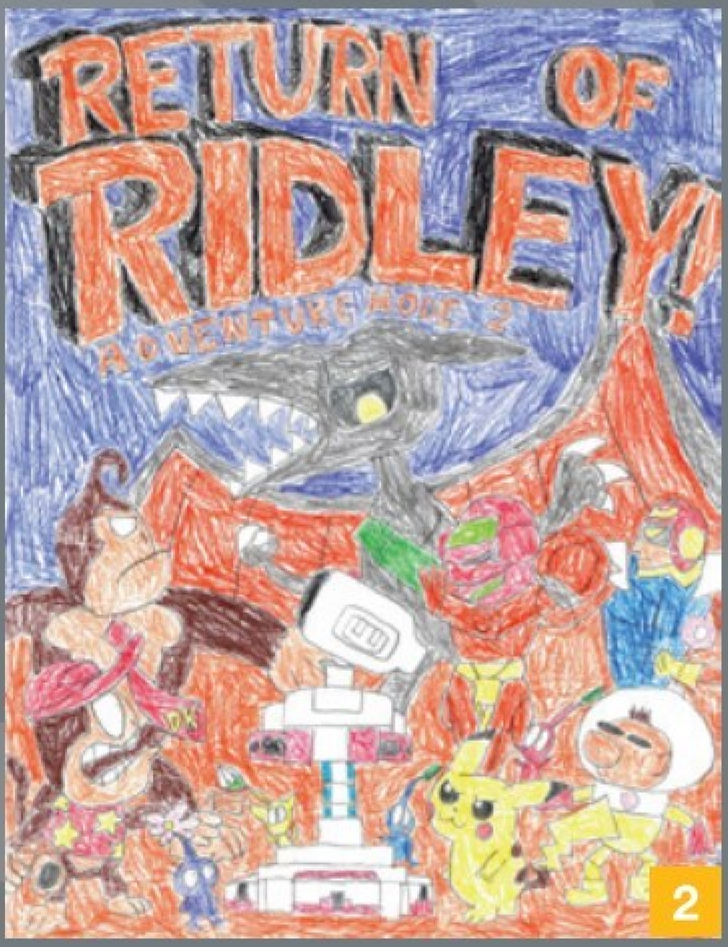
WINNER

1 Tetra
What could be more exciting than all of Nintendo's greatest characters coming together and…falling asleep under a tree?

2 Elijah Crowe
We're guessing this picture is Smash Bros.-related, but it would also make one helluva breakfast cereal.

3 Abigail Triplett
They say the eyes are a window to the soul, but Tracer's are more of a glowing, Aperture Science portal.

4 Antonina
Antonina may be young, but clearly she's a natural when it comes to video game character mash-ups.


RETURN OF RIDLEY!

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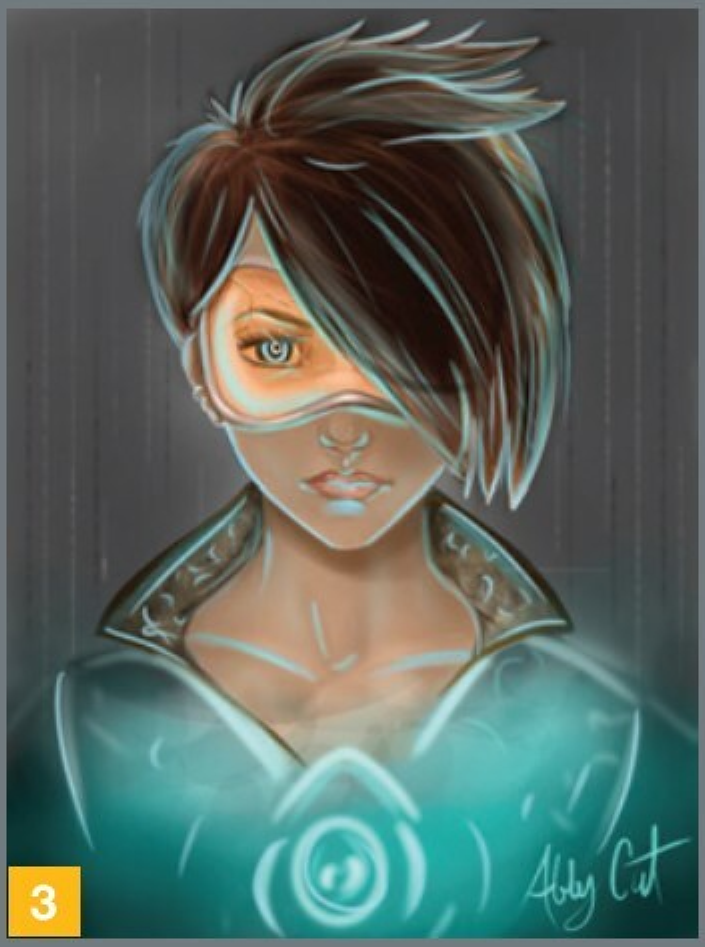

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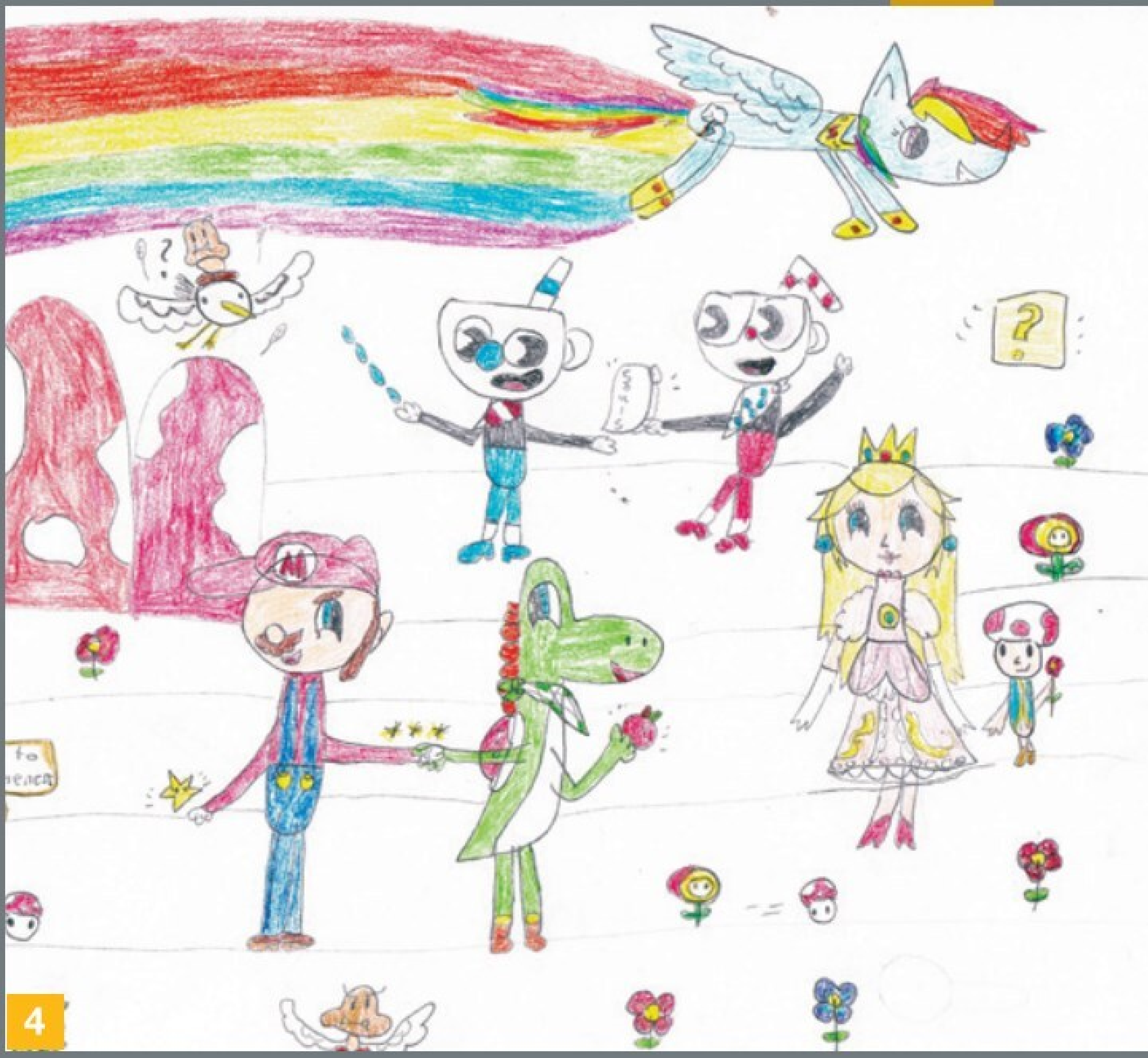

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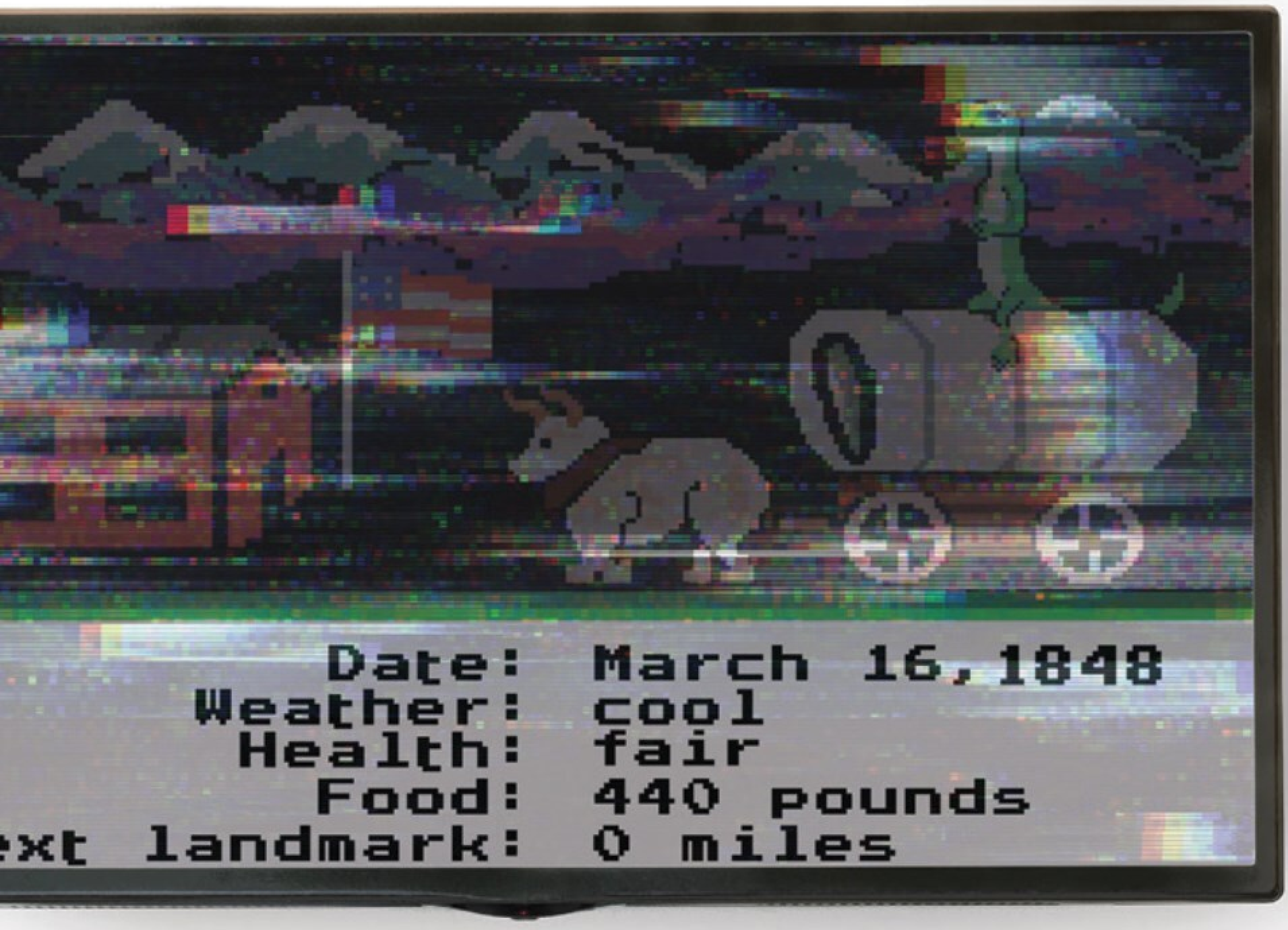
(Left) Kim and Elise shared their Dragon Quest love with PR guru Tara Bruno (center) and What's Good Games' Kristine Steimer (left) and Andrea Rene (right). **(Right)** Reiner and Brian Shea met the dreamy Professor Willow at this year's Pokémon Go Fest. Look, we know it was only a cardboard cutout, but they need this, alright?

DRAGON QUEST XI



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          Date:  March 16,1848
       Weather:  cool
        Health:  fair
          Food:  440 pounds
ext landmark:  0 miles
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A STORY OF REDEMPTION

A year after a disastrous debut, Pokémon Go Fest returned to Chicago for two days of catching and challenges

I

Imagine attending a rock concert that didn't have electricity, or a football game without a ball on the field. Last year's inaugural Pokémon Go Fest echoed these examples with a cellular blackout that didn't allow over 20,000 people to play Niantic's mobile game.

As Chicago's scorching heat took its toll on fans, chants of "fix the game" and "refund" grew angrier and louder. Niantic scrambled for solutions, but eventually waved the white flag. The developer was forced to expand the digital play space of the game – a move that essentially told people to vacate Chicago's Grant Park to hopefully be able to play in the greater city. In this larger space, players could finally catch the festival-exclusive Pokémon they traveled from around the world to encounter, but this last-second hail Mary didn't save the festival. The goal of Pokémon Go Fest was to bring players together, but ended up telling them to stay apart.

by Andrew Reiner

In the months that followed, Niantic was hit by a class-action lawsuit by people who attended the festival. The developer settled it for $1.6 million. The disaster that happened in the park coupled with a huge cash settlement likely meant Pokémon Go Fest was done.

In a surprising twist that seemed ill-advised, Niantic announced Pokémon Go Fest was returning for a second year to the scene of the crime. The developer quickly stated it learned from its mistakes and believed it could deliver on the promise of the first festival.

On July 14 and 15, Pokémon Go Fest came back to Chicago, moving just a few miles from the original festival's Grant Park location to the more spacious Lincoln Park. In this new location, Niantic created a 1.8 mile walking path for players to explore. The park was open to anyone, but only people with a ticket (and the necessary QR code scanned into the game) could experience the new content created for the festival. If you didn't have a ticket, you wouldn't see anything happening within the game – all standard stops and spawns were disabled for the two days in the park.

To limit the number of people in this area, Niantic sold a limited number of tickets, and forced players to pick whether they were playing on Saturday or Sunday – they couldn't do both days. Going into the event, Niantic representatives said players would find other things to do in the game outside of the festival grounds, making it sound like a full weekend in Chicago would be worth it for longtime fans.

The most pressing concern was the stability of the game and the cellular networks. If players couldn't connect to the game for a second year, a lawsuit would likely be the least of Niantic's worries. Last year almost turned into a riot, with people screaming obscenities at Niantic's founder and CEO, John Hanke, when he took the stage to address the conditions of the game.

Four of the biggest cell phone carriers worked with Niantic to increase performance capacity in the area. By placing COWs (cell on wheels) strategically across the park, AT&T was able to boost its performance by 452 percent. The collaboration paid off handsomely. Despite light rain over the entire first day, everyone was able to play, and it appeared everyone caught a king's bounty in Pokémon.

The theme of this year's festival was "A walk in the park," which pushed players to move along a path to reach themed territories that had different Pokémon spawns. The first destination reached by players was a volcano where Fire-type Pokémon were in great abundance. Niantic's idea of recreating the world of Pokémon with destinations across the park was fantastic, but the execution wasn't there. The volcano only stood about eight feet in height and looked like a cheap papier-mâché construct. For a game that has earned over $1.8 billion in two years, it appears this event had a tight budget. The arctic display, which at least had snow machines pumping out soapy snowflakes, would be crushed by most shopping mall setups for Santa Claus.

Players quickly learned they would have to visit these locations across the day to complete tasks for an exclusive Pokémon Go Fest quest from Professor Willow, an in-game NPC who wanted you to investigate Lincoln Park's "unusual geological phenomena." The missions he offered were easy to complete, and designed to give everyone at the festival a sense of accomplishment. Players far and wide could be seen questing to catch 10 of a specific Pokémon type – nothing evil like evolving a Magikarp or catching a Ditto. I finished all five of his missions in the festival's first three hours.

Willow's research culminated in an encounter with Celebi, a second-generation mythical Pokémon that hasn't been in the game yet. Much like the mythical counterpart Mew, Celebi could only be caught using AR, and escaped three balls before being captured. He cannot be traded or deleted from a Pokédex.

Celebi was the only big unlock at the festival. Regional-exclusive Torkoal traveled from India to Chicago for two days, and Unown once again showed up, but fans wanted to see more. Last year's debacle offered bigger surprises and changes to the game like the first legendary battles in the game (featuring Lugia and Articuno).

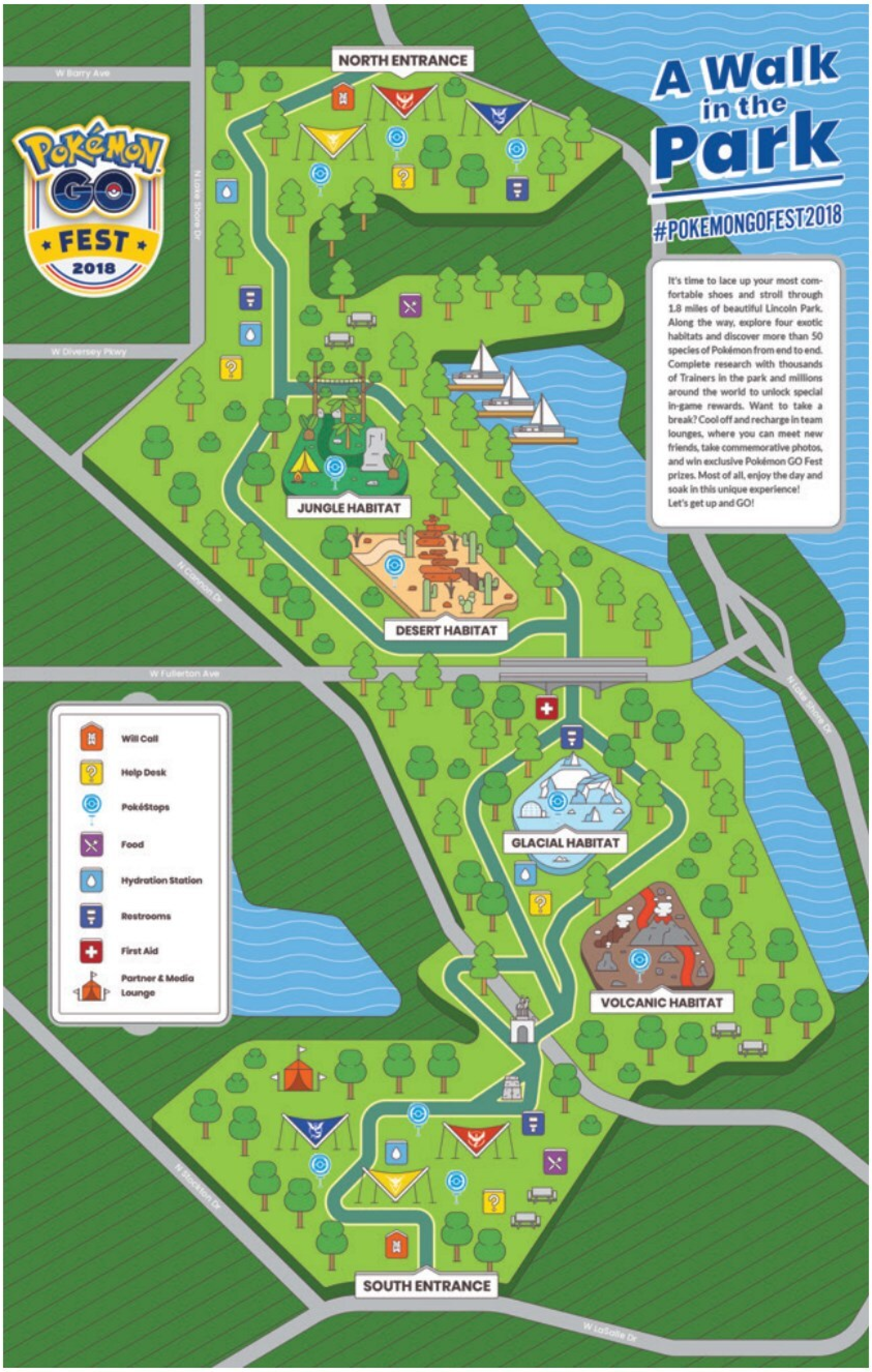
Regardless, getting Celebi before everyone in the world is cool, unless Niantic makes the quest available to everyone soon. Doing that would mostly defeat the purpose of Pokémon Go Fest for fans looking to get something new from the game.

While Niantic can beat its chest and declare this festival a great success, part of the Pokémon Go experience was missing. Niantic didn't want players grouping together in clusters, so no raid battles occurred within the park. We were instead told to head into the city to experience raids, yet when we did so, we found nothing was different from the standard game. Despite what was said leading into the show, Niantic didn't do anything new outside of the park. Shiny catch rates were higher, and Lugia returned on the anniversary of its debut, but these things also occurred worldwide, not just for people at the festival.

This is somewhat of a letdown, and something I hope Niantic addresses if the Fest returns next year. For those three hours that I was on a new quest, however, I had an absolute blast. Strategizing with fellow players at the park and listening to people speculate about the quest's reward was great fun. Over the two days, roughly 21,000 people had the chance to catch over 50 species of Pokémon, and walked away with one no one else in the world currently can get. That's not a bad way to spend a day. ◈

Go players traveled to different habitats to catch specific types of Pokémon

Niantic set up a 1.8-mile walking path in Chicago's Lincoln Park


A Walk in the Park
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JUNGLE HABITAT
DESERT HABITAT
GLACIAL HABITAT
VOLCANIC HABITAT
SOUTH ENTRANCE
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W Diversey Pkwy
N Lake Shore Dr
N Cannon Dr
W Fullerton Ave
N Lake Shore Dr
N Stockton Dr
W LaSalle Dr
Will Call
Help Desk
PokéStops
Food
Hydration Station
Restrooms
First Aid
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It's time to lace up your most comfortable shoes and stroll through 1.8 miles of beautiful Lincoln Park. Along the way, explore four exotic habitats and discover more than 50 species of Pokémon from end to end. Complete research with thousands of Trainers in the park and millions around the world to unlock special in-game rewards. Want to take a break? Cool off and recharge in team lounges, where you can meet new friends, take commemorative photos, and win exclusive Pokémon GO Fest prizes. Most of all, enjoy the day and soak in this unique experience!
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BUILD ‘EM UP, BREAK ‘EM DOWN

The world needs heroes. We spoke to Overwatch developers about how they create the colorful characters and the sometimes massive behind-the-scenes swaps.

by Daniel Tack

With 28 distinct heroes that all bring disparate abilities, backgrounds, and playstyles to the table, Blizzard has excelled at crafting an unforgettable cast. The latest addition to Overwatch’s roster is… a hamster in a ball. Only Blizzard could take an adorable little critter, throw it into a mech of death, and have it fit right in with the rest of the cast. We talked with lead designer Geoff Goodman and lead writer Michael Chu about what goes into making Overwatch characters special.

Wrecking Ball, a.k.a. Hammond, went through some big changes before becoming the adorable murder machine we know and love. From initial artwork dating back to early beta when Overwatch’s Arnold Tsang was exploring concepts and prototypes, no one knew exactly what the character would be.

“[Tsang] sort of drew this big round robot guy. It definitely wasn’t a hamster ball at that time, but we liked the idea of this big round robot thing, so we came up with different ideas of what that might be, and [created] this really rough paper design,” Chu says. “We thought it might almost be like a junkyard bot and you’d have these magnetize abilities. We always had the ball idea, we always had this big round guy, the idea was he’d roll around somehow and we didn’t have any idea on how that was going to work and then he’d magnetize himself and pull all the bullets to himself and then reverse magnetize them back.”

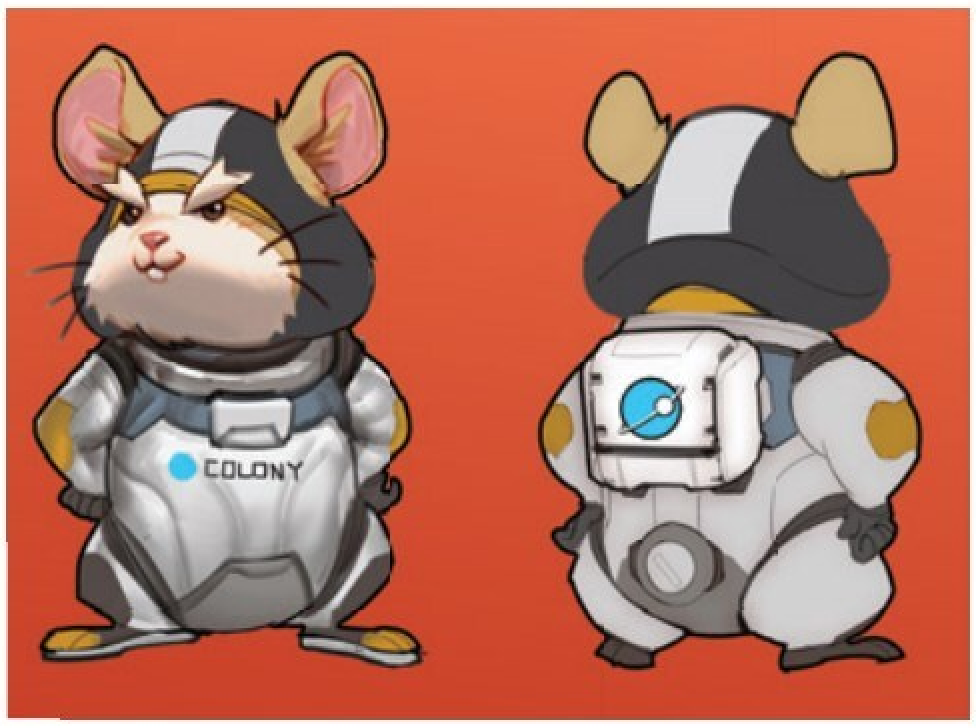
Once the concept is in place, there’s a massive amount of iteration and experimentation with movesets and abilities. Flowing from a core idea or two, the rest of the moveset and interactions get fleshed out.

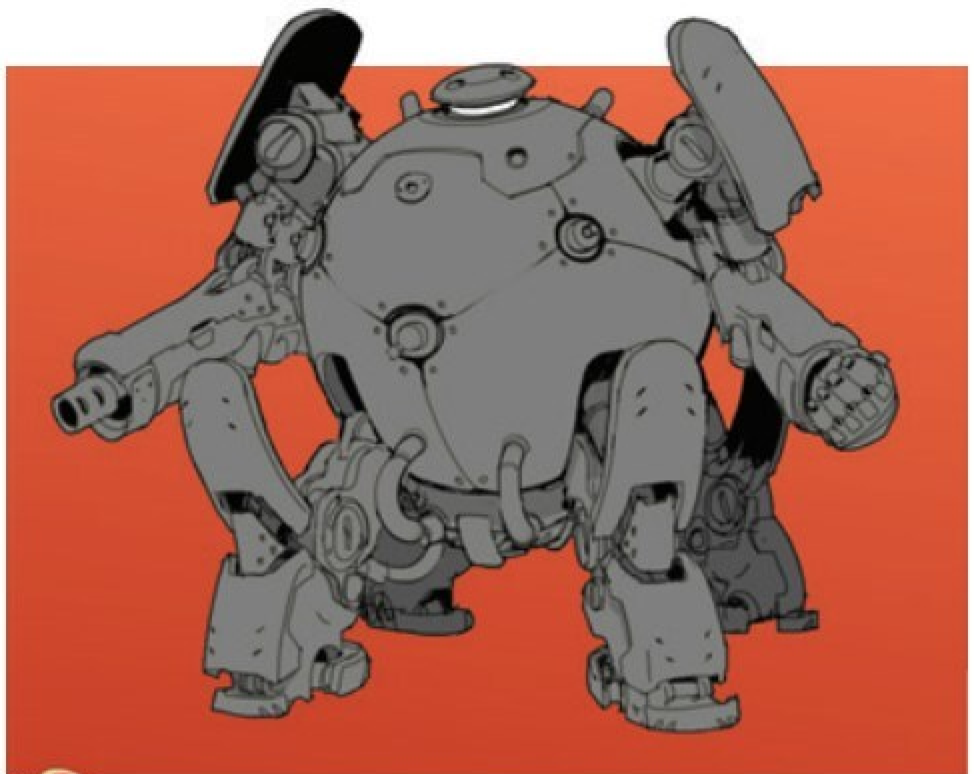
“Honestly a lot of the way we work is very iterative and we know pretty much nothing’s going to survive the paper design process, so we’ll just start getting it in game with the prototype,” Goodman says. “We were playing with him for a while, and the initial idea was he’d just roll around. [We wanted to] get him great from a physics standpoint so if there were slopes he’d roll faster down them, and slower on up-slopes, rolling into people should be really fun. The big moment for him was when we came up with the grappling ball.”

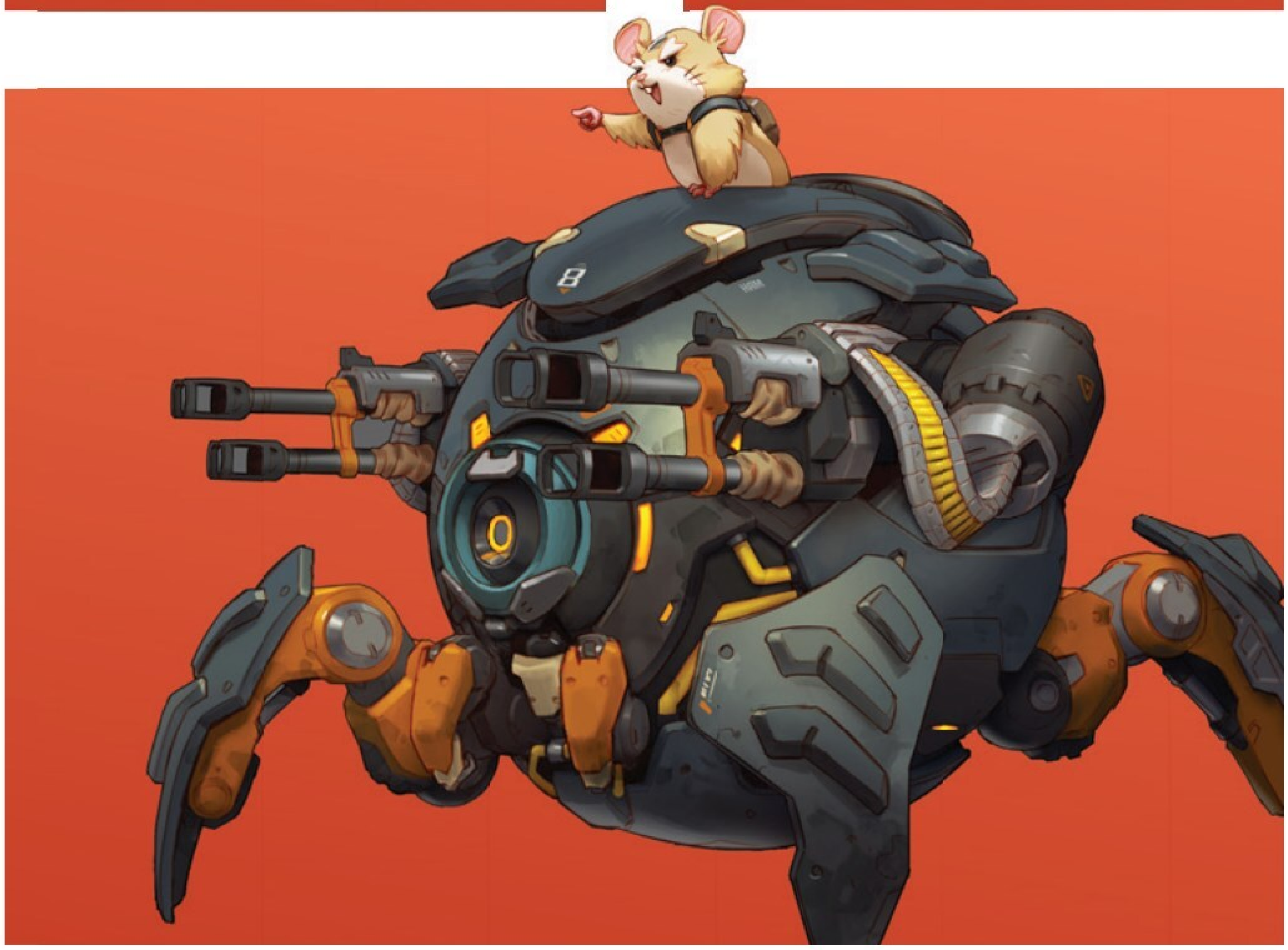
From concept art to execution, sometimes it comes down to selecting what the team thinks the game needs in terms of character roles. In Wrecking Ball’s case, once they had the concept, they knew they were looking for a tank role since they hadn’t done a tank in a while.

“Often it’s very gameplay-mechanics based, like in Orisa’s case we really needed another Reinhardt-style tank that moves pretty slow with her team and is kinda marching them forward,” Goodman says. “As opposed to the D.Va/Winston where they’re leaping forward far in front of your team to create space.”

Overwatch League is also a factor, though not the dominant one. The metagame of







competitive play can often influence popular compositions and hero picks in quickplay, so there is a sense of the meta trickling down from the most professional format to the most casual.

“In Wrecking Ball’s case specifically, it was much less about thinking of how the very competitive players are going to play, and more just we had this very fun concept that’s very different, and certainly it’s going to take a lot of skill to execute the movement at a very high level so there’s a lot of potential for the Overwatch League players to kind of excel,” Goodman says. “But someone like Brigette was a little bit different because we knew, coming from Overwatch League players, that they felt like they didn’t have great counters to a lot of faster characters like Genji and Tracer.”

Sometimes the process is also about remaking them. In cases like Mercy or Symmetra, huge sweeping changes can happen well after they’ve been in the game. These tweaks can be highly controversial in the community, as they can alter the character kits completely. Sometimes, these changes are to make characters more appealing to a broader playerbase, helping to get underplayed heroes back into the mix.

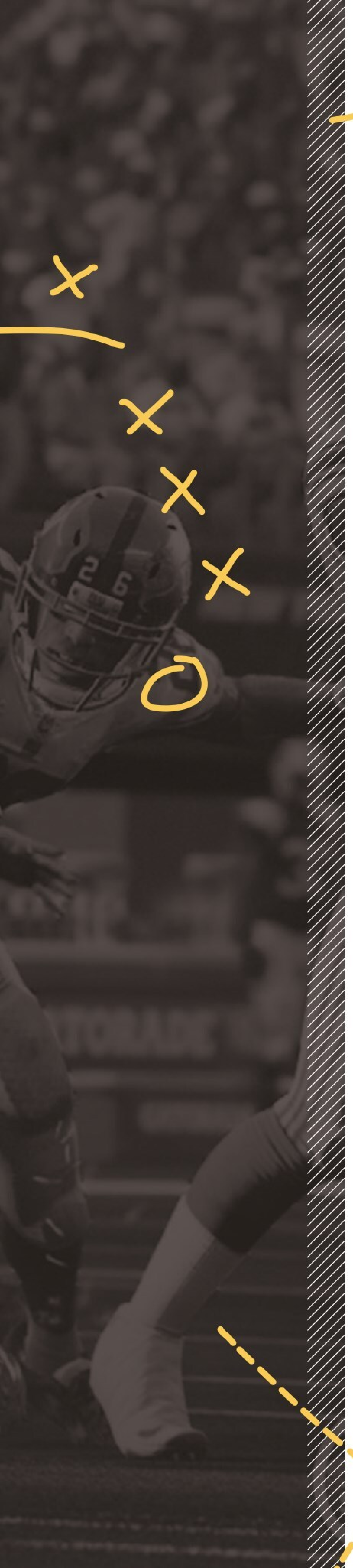
“[The revamps are] less about trying to get a balance going but getting more people to play the heroes. Looking at Symmetra’s stats, our stats show she wins quite a bit, actually she was our winningest hero for a long time from a stats perspective, but she had some of the lowest playtime – actually, the lowest playtime of any of the heroes – so it either means she is way too niche for certain maps or a lot of players don’t like playing her or, she doesn’t work with overall compositions,” Goodman explains.

What may surprise many players is that generally, the ultimate ability is the last part of the hero kit designed. Some characters, like Bastion, went through almost 10 different ultimates in internal testing. Some of Bastion’s experimental ultimate abilities allowed him to fly, shoot through walls, and operate a little remote-controlled bomb car. Genji had an assassination ultimate that would lock players in place while a “finishing” move was executed. He could combine this with another lost ability, one where he could perch or hang from walls with his sword to drop down on unsuspecting backlines. Widowmaker’s ultimate was originally a version of her current venom mine (with a much bigger, much deadlier explosion.) Others, like Pharah’s missile barrage, were immediate fits.

Overwatch continues to expand and evolve its heroes and villains. Blizzard currently has four heroes in the prototype stage, with many more still waiting to be tapped for treatment at the concept level. While it may be difficult to top the absurdity and adorability of Wrecking Ball, there’s no doubt that something exciting is on the way.

Fun Facts About Hammond

- The color for Hammond was based on Arnold Tsang’s hamster in college, named “Zugzug”
- Hammond’s Horizon Lunar Colony escape pod is built inside of the Wrecking Ball mech
- Hammond was once drawn as a robotic hamster before his finalized artwork
- Junkrat is a huge fan of Wrecking Ball/ Hammond
- Hammond likes to call himself “Wrecking Ball” as his official name in the Junkertown arena. Humans call him “Hammond”



Nearly everyone who plays sports dreams of being a pro athlete, but the numbers of those who actually make it that far is extremely small. With each step up from high school to college to the pros, the number of athletes who continue their journey shrinks. For instance, according to NCAA research published in 2017, only 6.8 percent of high-school football players go on to play in one of the three divisions of college football. The number who then go on to the NFL shrinks again to 1.5 percent.

Clint Oldenburg beat the considerable odds to crack an NFL roster, carving out a five-year career after the New England Patriots picked him in the fifth round of the 2007 draft. Like many late-round picks, Oldenburg ended up being a journeyman: a perennial backup who showed enough value to be signed by teams but was never considered a starter except for in an emergency. It's not a glamourous situation, but it still made Oldenburg special. He got to play pro football for six different teams, while many didn't get to play at all. After his chances in the NFL dried up in 2011, he signed a contract with the Saskatchewan Rough Riders of the Canadian Football League, but his heart wasn't in it.

"I made that decision that I was tired of chasing, tired of moving around from team to team," Oldenburg says. "I didn't want to go to [the Canadian Football League]. I'd already lived in six different cities in the last five years, and it was, 'How deep are you going to chase this with your prospects dwindling?' I knew that I had skills that were valuable in other areas, but I just didn't know if I had what it took to make that transition."

Starting over after spending your life focused on being a professional athlete is difficult. For every star player like Kurt Warner, who steps off the playing field and seamlessly transitions to being an analyst or color commentator in the booth, there are many who struggle or can't find a fulfilling role once they're not encased in the athlete's world.

A 2018 survey by the Professional Players Federation in the U.K. found that out of 800 former pros polled, half felt they didn't have control of their lives within two years of retiring, and 54 percent had concerns about their emotional and mental well-being at some point after retiring. Depression, financial problems, and addiction can become deterrents as athletes attempt to find a new identity and a second career.

Fortunately, Oldenburg had an idea of what he wanted to do after football – video game development. He joined the NCAA Football development team at EA Tiburon as an associate design intern working with the team's engineers in 2013, three months after he stopped playing. Former players like Oldenburg are taking the invaluable experiences they had on the playing field and turning them into something you can understand and enjoy in a video game, calling upon the qualities of inspiration, intelligence, dedication, and teamwork that sports and game development share.

Clint Oldenburg, Washington Redskins

JOINING THE TEAM

EA Sports NHL series producer Sean Ramjagsingh followed a similar path. Ramjagsingh started playing hockey in his native Canada at a young age, switching to basketball after a number of broken bones. After playing a year of international basketball at Taranaki in New Zealand, where he got a taste of the pressure to perform and pro sports' ruthless business side, Ramjagsingh's prospects of continuing to play pro ball started to dim.

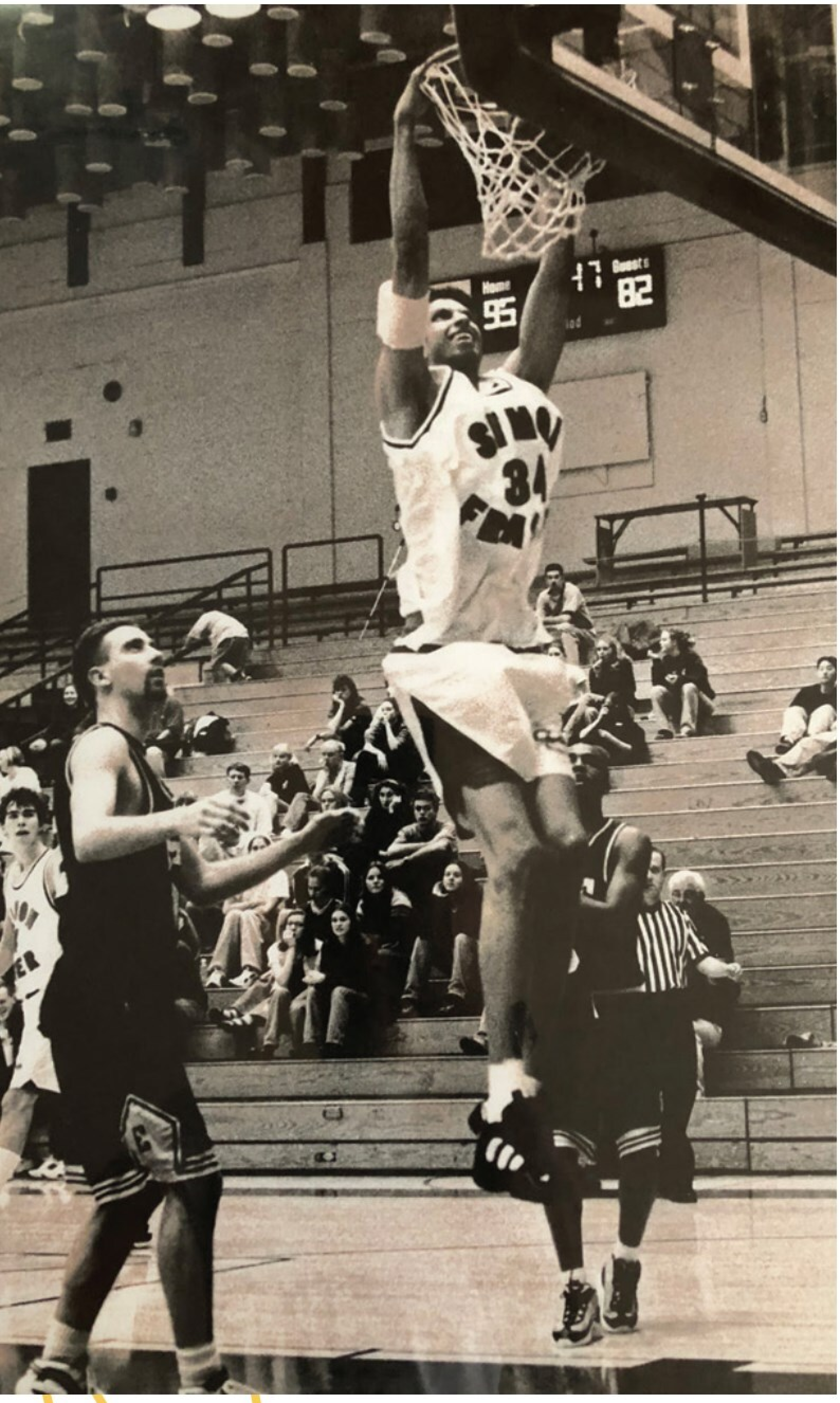
A contract to play in the U.K. had fallen through, so Ramjagsingh's agent was looking into other basketball opportunities when Ramjagsingh met Sean O'Brien – a fellow alum from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada – who had left Radical Entertainment (Prototype) to work at Electronic Arts. O'Brien left Radical's NBA Basektball series in the hands of Cam Weber, another Simon Fraser alum who is now an executive vice president at EA Sports.

At Radical, Ramjagsingh's job was to watch games and make plays for each team. "I loved everything about it," he says. "I talked to my agent about it because this experience had raised the bar in terms of what it would take for me to go back and play basketball."

As enthusiastic as Ramjagsingh was to join the Radical team, with its laid-back atmosphere that took him by surprise, he quickly realized that even though he was in a position that catered to his basketball background, in some ways he was a rookie all over again. "It took me three months before I understood what a software engineer does because I was always looking for the programmers, and when people talk about software engineers, I thought that was a whole other group of people. I didn't want to let my teammates down, so I learned as much as I could and spent time with the engineers to understand how they work," he says.

Oldenburg recalls a similar culture shock when he started his internship. "The first six weeks was really just me trying to learn what people do here," he says. "Everyone here speaks in acronyms all the time. I was sitting in meetings and I had no idea what anyone was talking about – I really wasn't sure if I could cut it here."

Meanwhile, Oldenburg and Ramjagsingh's pursuit of new careers is mirrored across the industry. Competitors Visual Concepts hired former international basketball player Scott O'Gallagher as a producer for their lauded NBA 2K franchise as well as commentator for the series' ambitious esports initiative. O'Gallagher had previously started a video game website (the now-defunct ogsports.com) as well as worked for the NBA Live series.



Sean Ramjagsingh

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MARKOV
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Tim Hortons

"I thought that once I was done playing team sports at a competitive level, that would be my last opportunity to be part of a team," says former pro basektball player and current NHL series producer, Sean Ramjagsingh. However, he says that game development relies on leadership, competition, and camaraderie just as much as sports

> “One of the things [EA Tiburon] were really afraid of – and still to this day about hiring football players – these guys are going to come in and big-time everyone here just because they played, right?”
>
> – Clint Oldenburg

BECOMING A VETERAN

Despite the unsure start, Oldenburg was offered a full-time job as an associate designer 10 weeks into his internship, and started overhauling the blocking system for Madden 25. When Oldenburg was working on the offensive linemen, he had the team build him extension tools so he could tweak blocking and set the defensive gaps via selecting animations and assignments from drop-down menus for each player.

He also worked on linemen’s initial moves, which is still in the game, something he wanted to do without making it too confusing for gamers. To do this, he thought back to his fundamentals as a football player. “‘When we were installing pass protection with the Redskins, what did we do?’” he said to himself. “On the first day of practice the first thing we did was our first step. ‘What is your first step based on the depth of the QB’s drop, and which guy are you trying to block?’”

Making Madden starts with what he’s learned playing the game in real-life and goes through the translation process into a video game. “It pretty much starts with, ‘Here’s what I’d like to do,’ and [the engineers] come back with, ‘Here’s some of the things it can do and what it can’t do,” Oldenburg says. “We design something that meets in the middle of what we can actually support and what I need. The engineers are so good they give me about 80 percent of what I ask for.”

After years working on Madden’s blocking, Oldenburg’s responsibilities with the series’ gameplay grew, and have earned him the job as the creative leader of the entire gameplay team.

Oldenburg’s colleague, Madden game designer Larry Richart, is a former quarterback from the University of Florida who backed up Doug Johnson in the team’s win in the 1999 Orange Bowl versus a Donovan McNabb-led Syracuse. Richart started in testing working on the playbooks (“We had a lot of checklists.”), and went on to include new tools over time, creating features that allowed players to do things like add audibles corresponding to their current formation and personnel set.

Later on he would leverage his experience as a quarterback to help revamp the passing mechanics, giving players the ability to throw different types of passes as well as tune their trajectory and feel against various defensive coverages. He currently works on the series’ franchise mode, where he’s worked with the likes of Oldenburg on the mode’s game-planning feature. Between them, they’ve had a big influence on some of the game’s core components.

Larry Richart, Getty Images

DEVELOPMENTAL LEADERS

Along the way, Oldenburg, Richart, and Ramjagsingh all continued to hone integral sports skills like teamwork, leadership, the competitive spirit, and communication in their development careers. Oldenburg says as much as it is the gameplay engineers’ job to make his vision happen in the game, it’s on him to present it to them in the best way possible. “What we have to be really good at to work with engineers is take sometimes really complicated things – nothing in football is overly complicated – and find a way to break them down into simpler terms… I think that’s how [Richart and I] learned playbooks,” he says. “All the plays and formations in a playbook are just basically a coach trying to figure out what the simplest way is for us to remember what our jobs are. If I want to design a two jet protection, I’m not going to throw a bunch of verbiage around that an engineer’s never heard before. I’m going to try and explain it in a way that makes sense to him so that he can see what I’m trying to see.”

Legacy and mentorship are also integral to sports, whether it’s a successful coach teaching coordinators under him who then go on to put their own stamp on the game or a smart veteran showing a rookie how to be a pro. Both Oldenburg and Ramjagsingh have worked with current pros to show them what game development is like, creating a pathway should they be interested in also making the transition into the industry once their playing days are over.

Oldenburg invited some Raiders players out to the studio to attend design meetings and learn about all of the game’s different development disciplines. On the last day of the boot camp, he had them pitch a feature for Madden. “It was really cool for us because they started talking a very similar language,” he says. “They started to think about a lot of the things we were thinking about…” In the future Oldenburg says he would like to get together with the NFL Players Association and each team and make it a yearly occurrence.

Oldenburg says shortly after he retired from football he had some chances to get back into the game, including an open invitation for a spot on the now-defunct arena football team the Orlando Predators, but his retirement from the sport didn’t mean he had to leave the sport behind. It just meant he would influence it in a different way – as a game developer. “I don’t want to just be known as the football guy working on Madden. I want to be known as a Madden guy.” ◆

Into The Weird And Fantastical Upcoming Games Of 2018

This year's E3 had an excellent showing of games, as you might have guessed from last month's Top 50. However, beyond the bustle and strong showings from triple-A games that included the likes of Cyberpunk 2077 and Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice, a string of wonderfully bizarre indies were also on the show floor, setting proper expectations for what we're going to see in the future.

Here are the weirdest, most captivating indies we're looking forward to in the months to come.

by Javy Gwaltney and Jeff Cork

Let's kick things off with a little stabbin' and spelunkin' with **Ashen**. This ambitious Souls-like indie from Aurora44 and Annapurna Interactive replaces the deepest reaches of fantasy kingdoms and hellish Lovecraftian nightmares with a somber, chilly world that's beautiful to behold. A sense of isolation pervades Ashen, as you strike out to find allies and take a stand against the dark, founding settlements, mastering both crafting and combat to survive. Players can run into other human-controlled characters as well, filling this world with wild unpredictability that will be interesting to watch unfold when Ashen launches later this year on both Xbox One and PC.

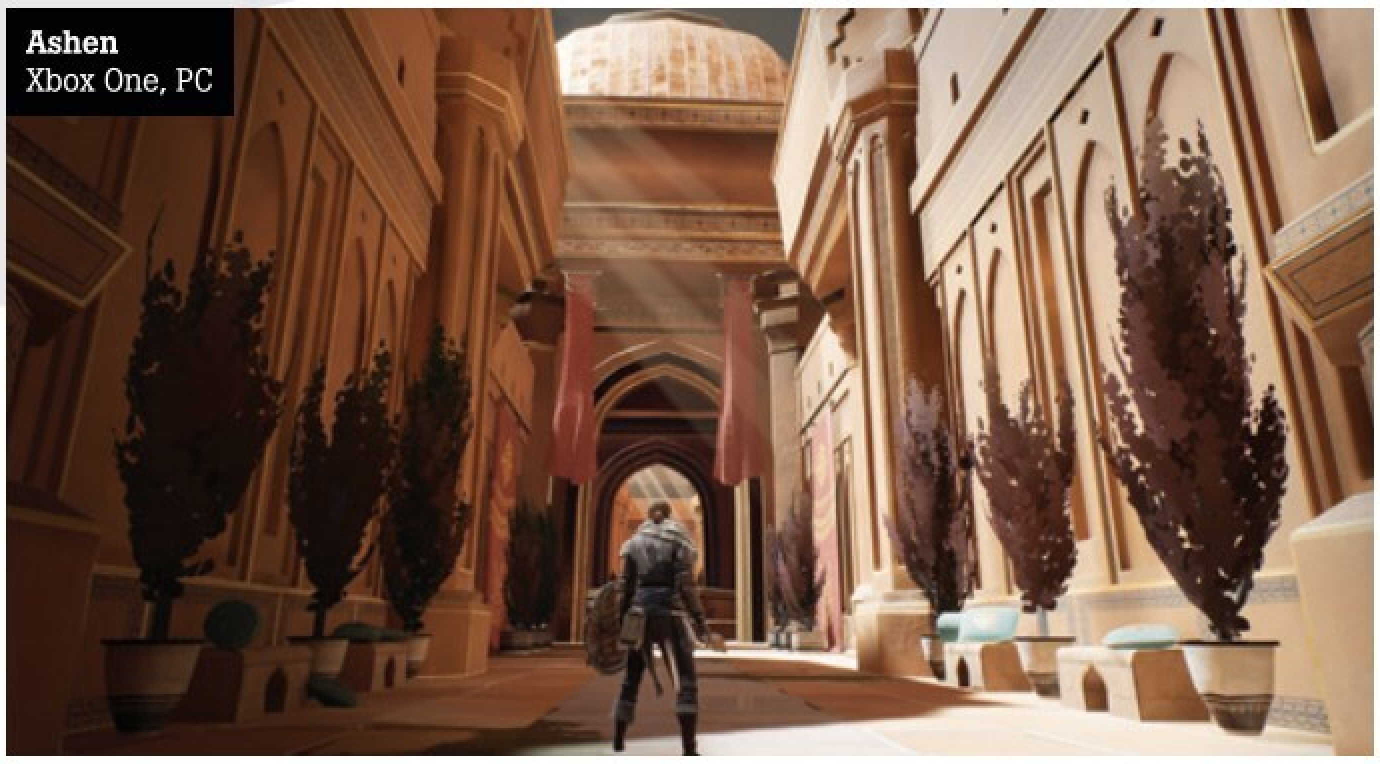
The internet is so ubiquitous today that it can be difficult to recall a time when going online was a new and exciting prospect. Even if you weren't alive during the '90s, Tendershoot's upcoming **Hypnospace Outlaw** provides an astonishingly faithful recreation of what it was like to surf the net in that period. The visuals highlight the era's limited display resolution and color palette, but there's more to it than that.

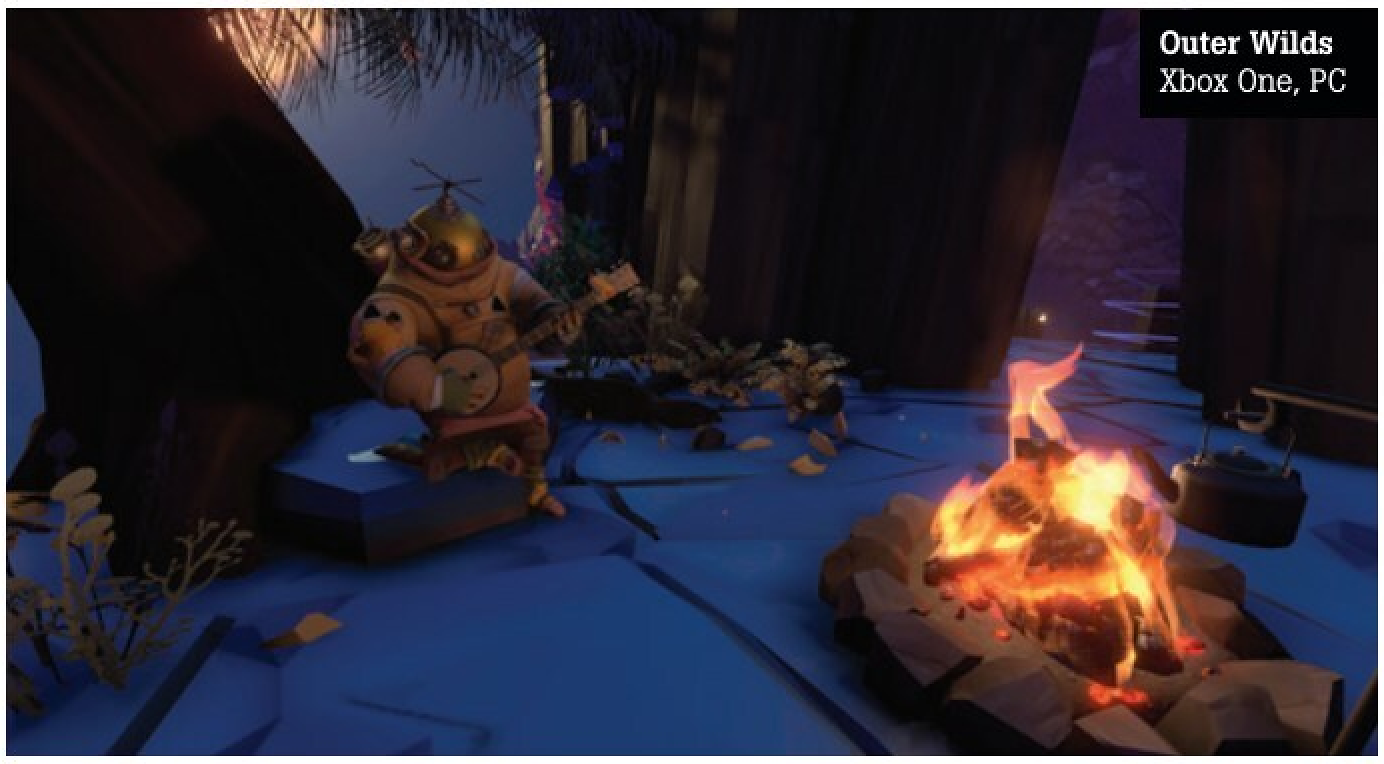
Developer Jay Tholen captures the mix of naivety, exploration, and terrible graphic design that made the early web such an odd cultural gumbo. There's a clever adventure game under it all, too, where players help police the network for copyright infringement, harassment, and other netiquette violations. Look for it on PC later this year.

Mobius Digital's debut effort **Outer Wilds**, scheduled to arrive later this year on Xbox One and PC, is an interstellar collision of sci-fi and Americana, a universe where astronauts explore planets in search of information about existence before sitting down to play a banjo on a log near a campfire. Outer Wilds' premise is simple: you're tasked with exploring the game's solar system equivalent in search of secrets, but you've only got 20 minutes before the universe resets! Every run of Outer Wilds is intriguing, partially because its world is so beautiful and strange. In the words and spirit of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*'s Q, we can't wait to play Outer Wilds and see what's "out there."

If you're not feeling too much like an astronaut and instead need a good laugh with friends, a remedy isn't too far away. Jackbox has remained one of the best game series to break out when your pals are over and you want to annoy and delight one another. Who can resist the goofy, lying antics of Fakin' It or the Saw-themed trivia breakout sessions of Trivia Murder Party? Well, more is on the way, with **Jackbox Party Pack 5** containing several games, including newcomer Patently Stupid. Patently Stupid has you and your fellow players creating "hilarious inventions to solve stupid problems." This version of Jackbox also includes a new version of the classic trivia, gameshow-esque You Don't Know Jack.

Jackbox Party Pack 5 arrives on PC and unspecified consoles later this year, and we can't wait to hold another game night to celebrate the occasion.


Ashen
Xbox One, PC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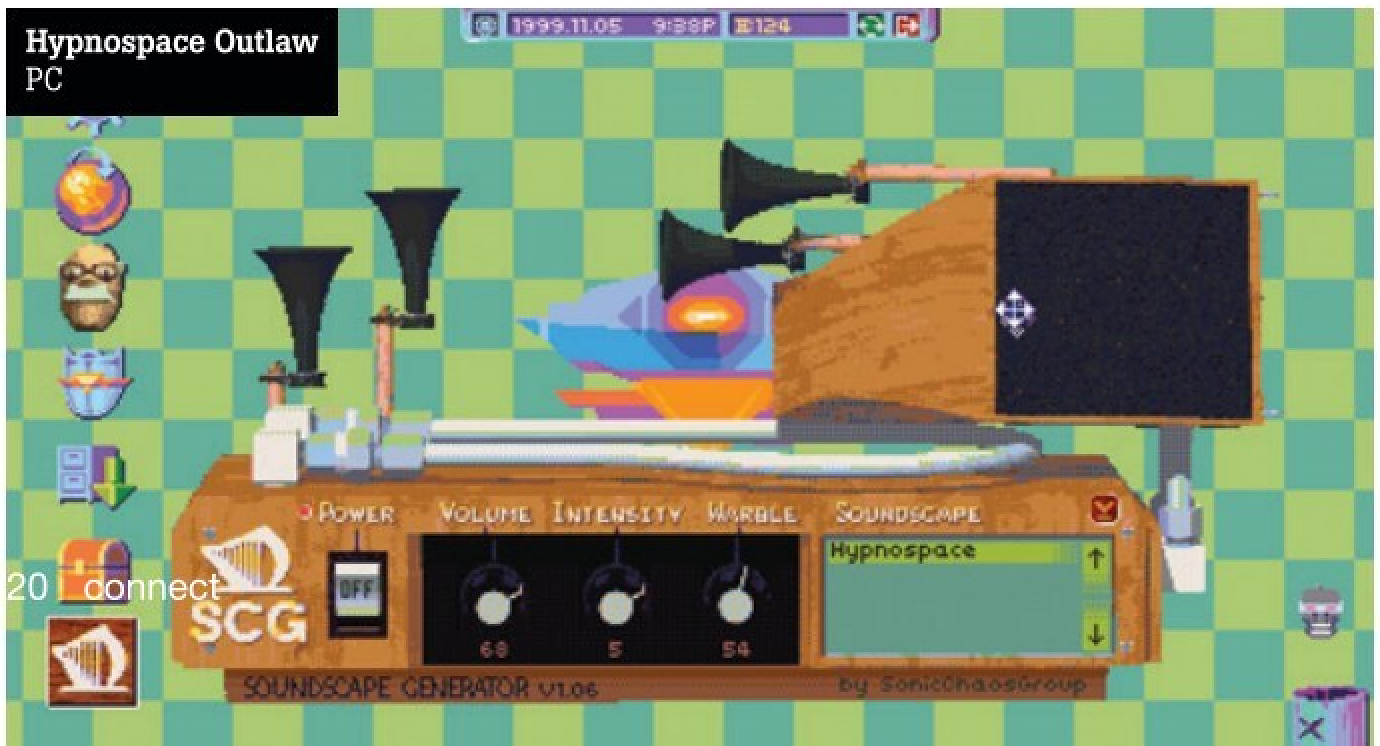
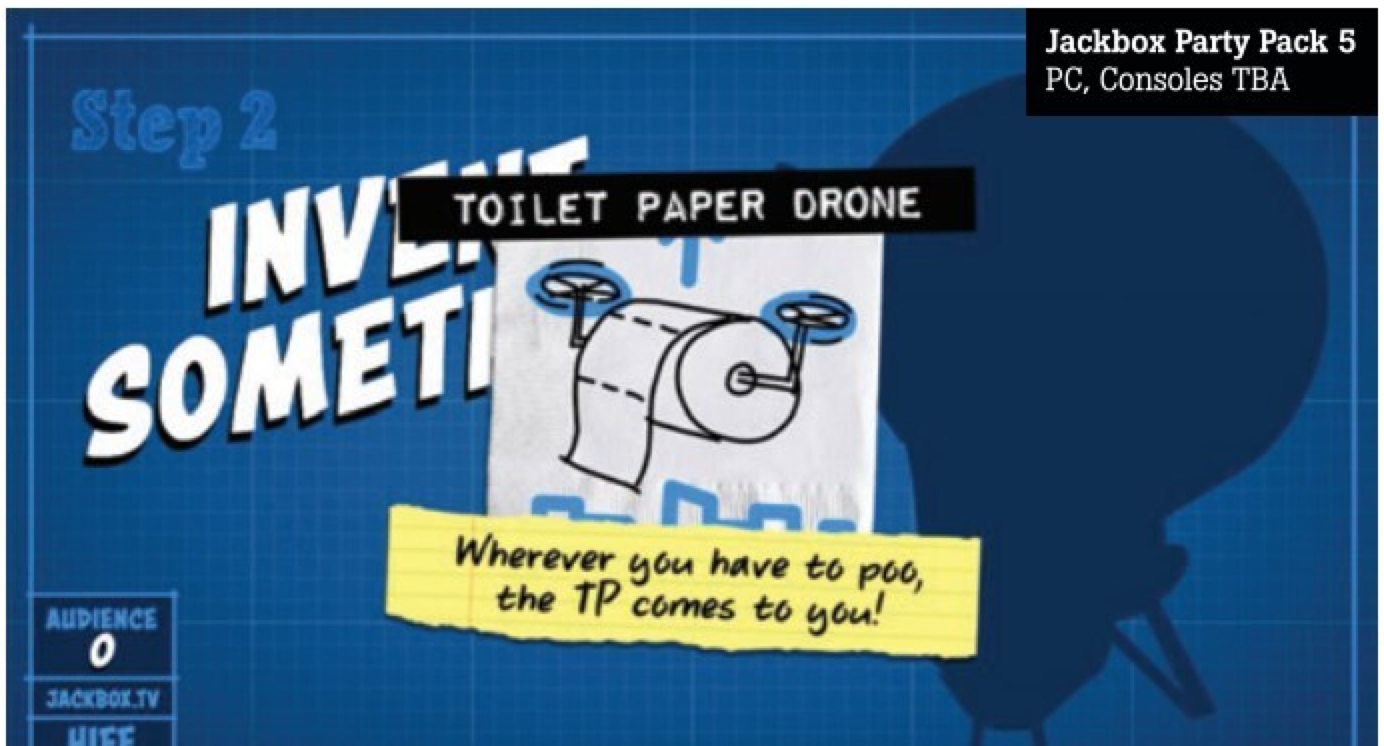
Xbox One, PC


Hypnospace Outlaw
PC


Jackbox Party Pack 5
PC, Consoles TBA

The Good

A rumor from tech site Thurrott points to **TWO VERSIONS OF MICROSOFT'S NEXT HOME CONSOLE** coming in 2020. One would be a traditional unit, while the second uses cloud-based gaming augmented with local computing. The cloud unit would cost less than the traditional one, but Thurrott anticipates it would require a subscription.

The Bad

THE ONRUSH DEVELOPMENT TEAM at Codemasters has been dissolved after reported poor sales of the game, according to Eurogamer, with some lower-level members possibly being folded into other areas of the company. The development team came over from Sony's Evolution Studios after PS4's Driveclub fizzled out.

The Ugly

TWO GUILD WARS 2 WRITERS WERE FIRED by developer ArenaNet after engaging in a Twitter argument with a fan over the topic of branching conversations. The firings kicked off larger discussions, including online civility, the public/private nature of social media, whether a directed Twitter mob played a part in the terminations, if ArenaNet should have backed their employees in the process (and if the company was complicit), and even if the contributions of writer Jessica Price in particular were significantly downplayed in the termination process.

Quotable

"I'll tell you right now, the only BR we're really interested in is Battle Rifle."

343 Industries writer **Jeff Easterling** downplays a battle royale mode for Halo.

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ADE SECRETS

We went on a whirlwind tour to learn how a Pokémon becomes a card

by Suriel Vazquez

Since 1996, the Pokémon Trading Card Game (TCG) has exceeded all expectations. It rode the fever pitch of the Pokémon craze that swept the world in the late '90s, selling millions of packs around the world. Parents feared their children would lose themselves (and their own money) to the game, retailers were constantly selling out their stock, and schools banned the cards from their classrooms.

But the card game, much like Pokémon itself, has proved more than a passing fad. As of March, nearly 26 billion cards have been sold worldwide in over 11 languages across 74 countries and regions. This year's Pokémon World Championships offers over $500,000 in prizes. With 80 sets released in the United States and more releasing at a steady clip, it's clear the TCG holds a large claim to the Pokémon pie, and shows no signs of slowing down.

To see how these extremely popular cards are made, The Pokémon Company recently offered us a rare look at how Creatures, the studio in charge of maintaining the TCG, designs, draws, tests, and releases new additions to one of the world's most popular card games.

FROM DIGITAL TO CARDBOARD

Although the logo in its lobby is a clean, white-on-black printing of its name, visitors immediately know they're entering Pokémonland when setting foot in Creatures. They're greeted by a chest-high figure of an Alolan Exeggutor alongside plushies of various pocket monsters and other Pokébelia lining its various nooks and chairs. Although the studio was originally formed as Ape (the developer behind Earthbound), Creatures is clearly fully dedicated to the franchise it's helping to cultivate.

Like many card games, the Pokémon TCG is tied to a larger media empire. As such, making sure it has synergy with the rest of the Pokémon brand is a top priority for Creatures. "The Pokémon that were really featured heavily in the [latest] video game, or had a big role in the story, we'll make sure they're at the center of whatever the set we're making is," says the TCG's game director Atsushi Nagashima.

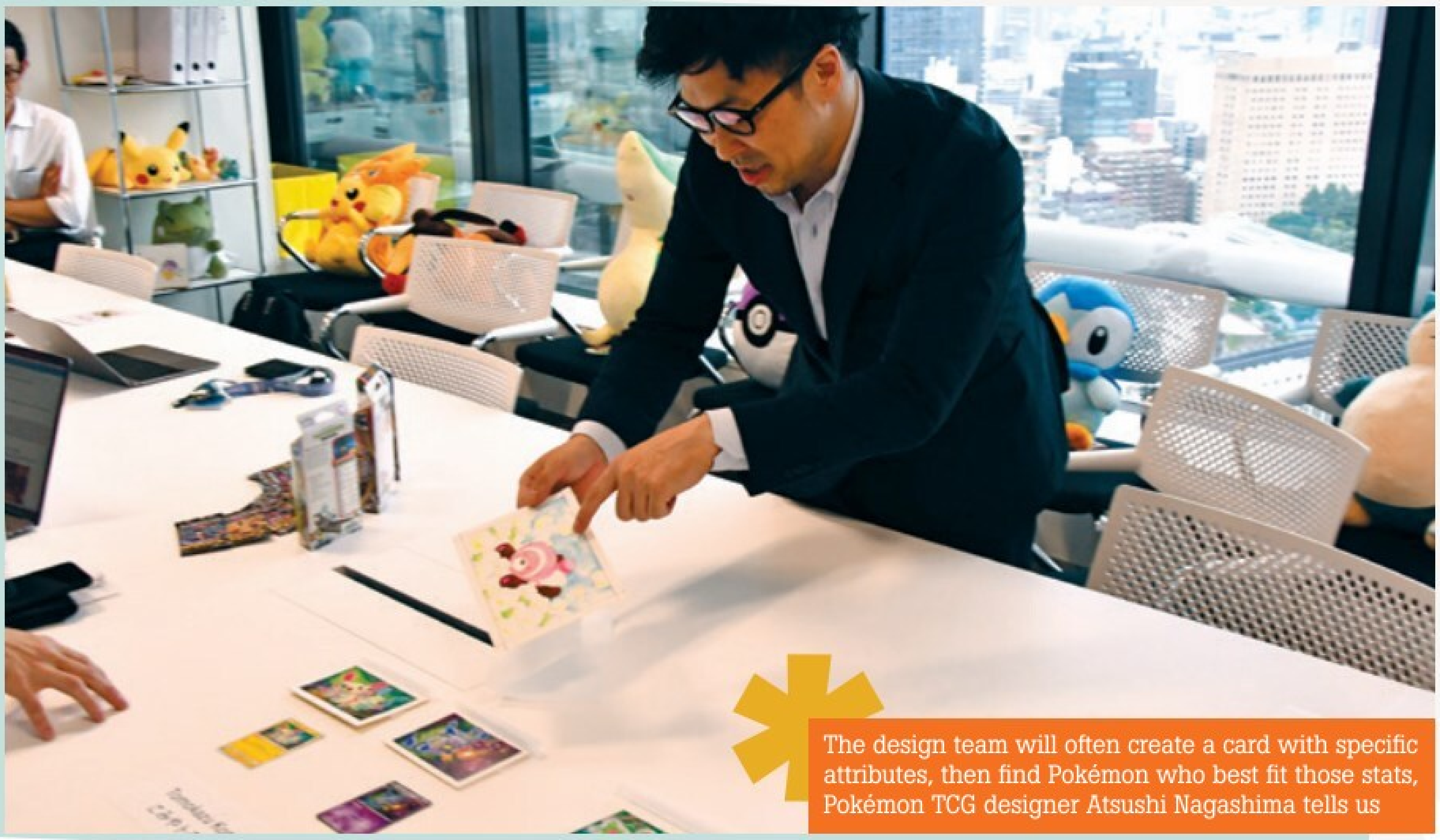
Despite the attachment to an established franchise, Nagashima and his crew of designers have quite a bit of freedom. After deciding on the overall theme of a new set based on what's going on in the world of Pokémon, Nagashima and his team begin outlining the "logic" (the abilities and effects) of the set. They then work with artists on the look of the cards, as well as individual art pieces based on the characters and mechanics they're emphasizing. All in all, it takes about one year for a full set of cards to go from conception to release.

Creatures also must choose how to adapt aspects from the games into card form, which can often be difficult. Mega Evolutions (temporary transformations Pokémon can undertake, introduced in Pokémon X and Y), for example, proved troublesome. "In the trading card game, you have two steps to get to your final evolution, and if we added another step on top of that, you just wouldn't have enough room in your 60-card deck to make that feasible," Nagashima says. The team eventually decided to limit these evolutions to the already-powerful EX/GX Pokémon, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. "Kids already knew [EX cards] were really strong," Nagashima says. "So to have an even stronger version of that, I think that kind of got a lot of people excited."

While it may not seem like an important part of designing a card game, Creatures does spend time crafting the "story" of each set, but because cards can only convey so much information through images and single lines of flavor text, it's not at the forefront. One recent set, Breakthrough, involved the story of two parallel worlds split apart by time, each with its own Mewtwo. "There was a Mewtwo that was in this advanced world, this really advanced civilization, and there was a Mewtwo that was in this more old-fashioned or old-timey world," Nagashima says. "And these two worlds collide and the world goes into chaos and is destroyed as a result of that." Despite the minimalist nature of the "storytelling" in each set, players do occasionally discuss potential storylines of certain cards when they launch.

As game director, Nagashima also has some sway over which Pokémon get to be part of each set, and he's not above using his influence to get personal favorites in the mix. "One of my favorites is Darkrai, and I think you'll notice there's a lot of strong Darkrais [in the game]." Nagashima does try to keep in mind less popular Pokémon, however. "We really think that a lot of kids have just completely different favorite Pokémon," he says. "So we really feel like the trading card game is really the best place to shine the spotlight on Pokémon that may not get a chance to shine otherwise."

The most popular Pokémon have received multiple iterations throughout the years, but Nagashima and his team haven't found it as much of a challenge as you might think to come up with new twists on them. "I think an important part of that is always having a lot of different people asking what they think,"



The design team will often create a card with specific attributes, then find Pokémon who best fit those stats, Pokémon TCG designer Atsushi Nagashima tells us

Nagashima says. “A lot of people have different impressions of a character than for example I would, and even outside of the game design team, our marketing or PR people, or different teams – I always have my antennas out.”

Another aspect Creatures keeps in mind is accessibility. As a card game ages and new ideas are introduced, it’s common for games to either become more intricate, or for cards to creep up in power. Nagashima acknowledges the latter has been the case, but according to him, it’s difficult for a card game to avoid both. “There is a path where you can keep the numbers exactly the same and keep making cards,” he says. “But the only way to differentiate them at that point is to make really complicated logic, so you constantly need to make more complicated stuff.”

Creatures knows Pokémon must, at some level, be something any child can learn quickly, so it’s opted to bump up the numbers instead of introducing too many new ideas. Starting around the time of the Black and White era (around 2010), the company began making a conscious effort to find ways to make it harder for new players to be trounced by veterans. “We designed the cards in a way that, even if a kid is playing up against someone much older, it will still be a game where they can at least feel like they’re fighting on an even playing field,” Nagashima says.

For instance, many Pokémon abilities deal more damage per successful coin flips, and cards like Pokémon Catcher can swap an opponent’s active Pokémon out for a weaker one instantly. These abilities may not make the game more “balanced,” but tend to make matches more exciting for newer players who might otherwise get trounced by pure skill.

A DRAWN-OUT LEGEND

Mitsuhiro Arita was drawing Pokémon long before they had taken over the world, and meeting him is the next stop on our tour.

Working as a freelance illustrator when the card game was in its prototype stage, Arita is responsible for some of the most recognizable playing cards in the world. The original holographic Charizard, bending its neck downward to breathe fire amidst a slew of red-orange mist and action lines, is Arita’s work. The original portlier Pikachu card, with its ears, tail, and back tinted purple from the light behind it? That’s him too.

Arita keeps a binder full of all the cards he’s drawn over the years (the company sends him every card he’s illustrated), and it’s a pretty thick binder, holding 537 cards. Although he’s still a freelancer, The Pokémon Company remains his biggest client, and drawing cards for the TCG has been a major part of his career.

When Arita was first drawing cards, the process was much more difficult than it is now. The original games, Red and Blue, had only green-and-black mock-ups and concept art to work with. “When I first started working on the project, pretty much that’s all I had as reference, were those sprites with the pixel art of the Pokémon,” Arita says.

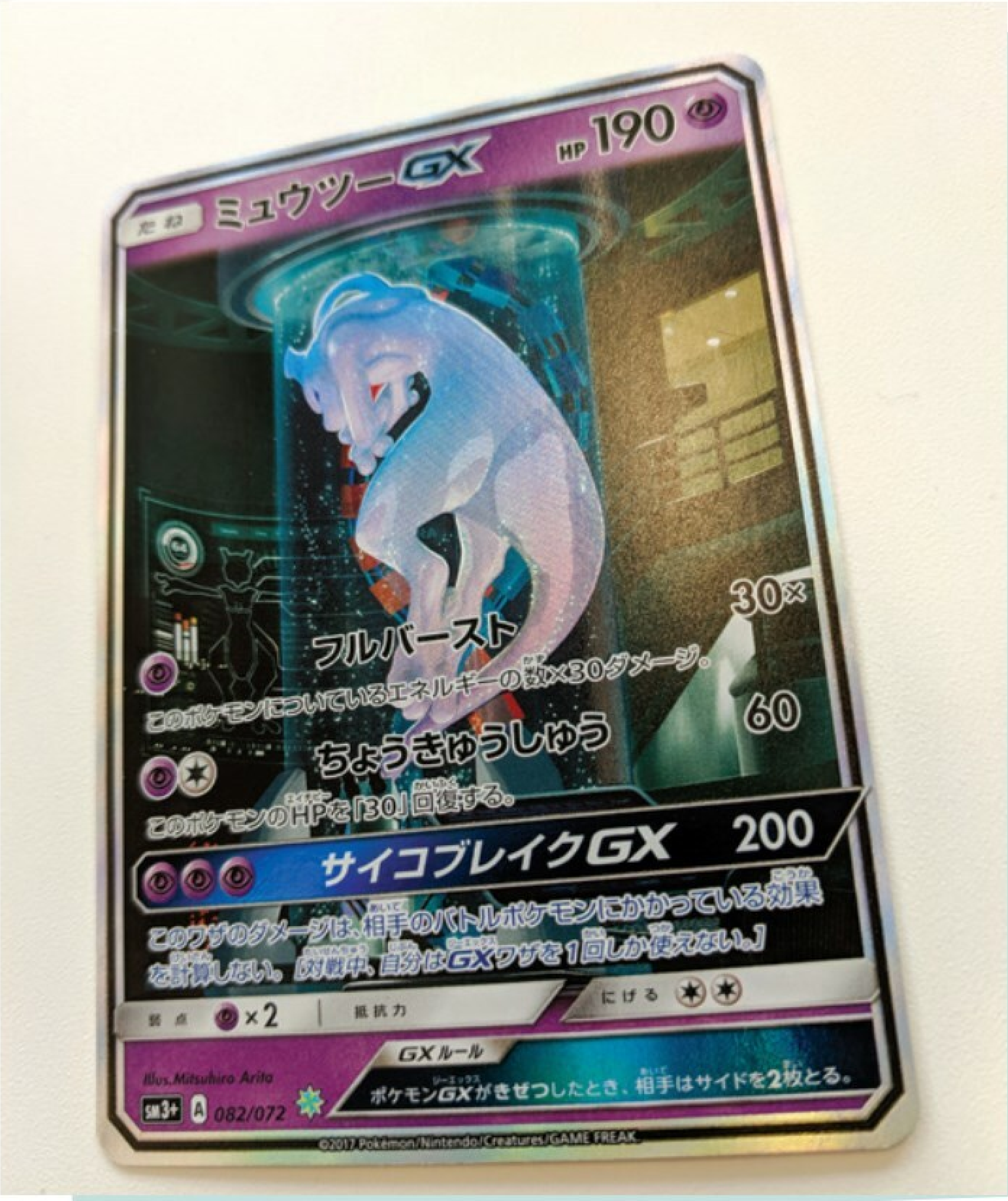
Arita had very little idea of what he was drawing, either; this was before the games had launched. Even after the games were out, it took them about a year to become the massive hits they are today. Had he known what kind of impact the monsters he was drawing then would have on the world, he might have charged a little more for his services, he jokingly tells us.

Though even in the early days of his work he was working digitally, using a computer to draw individual cards required a very different approach, Arita says. “The power of the computers was so weak that for a big poster size, you’d have to break it up into sections, and color it while keeping in mind everything,” he says. “So it was a really big pain to use computers back then.”

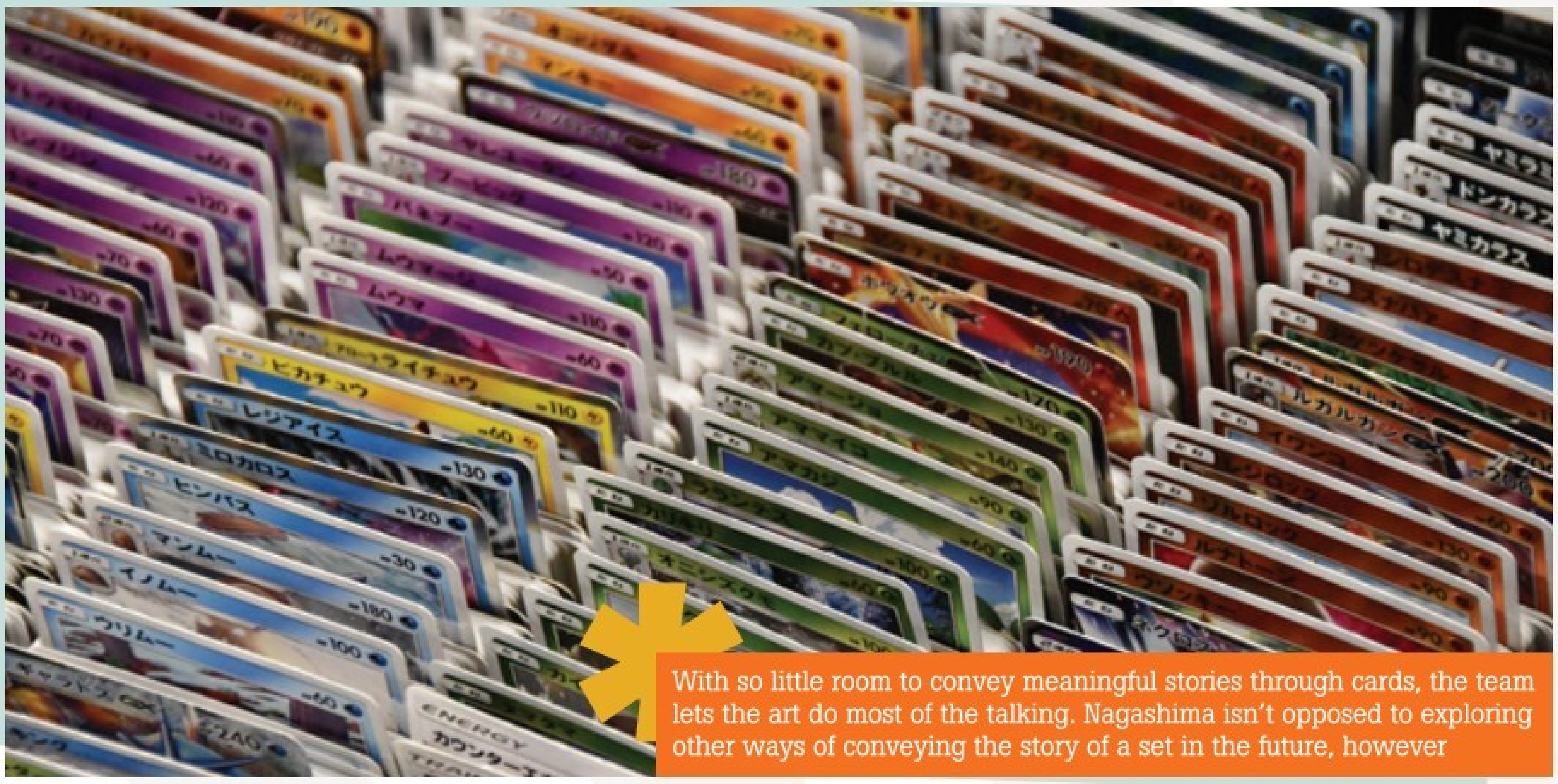
With modern computers, scale is no issue technically, but Arita still keeps it in mind. “One of the things you see with the card game, when you have a really detailed scene and you shrink it down into this card, it actually has less of an overall impact, it’s less imposing, so you really have to be careful with that balance,” he says.

Along with the tech, some Pokémon have undergone changes to their design over the years. Pikachu, for example, went from having a more portly build to being a bit more athletic, a change Artia attributes to the needs of the Pokémon anime at the time. “They had to animate it, and it wouldn’t really work for [that early design] to move around with those original proportions very much,” Arita says. “But sometimes even when I’m doing illustrations of Pikachu to this day, if it’s not like an action shot or moving around, I’ll stick to the older design, where it doesn’t have much of a neck.”

While he’s aware of how impactful some of his earlier works have been, he’s happy to have his more recent drawings gain some prominence, such as the one of the variants of the GX Mewtwo card from last year’s Shining Legends set, which shows the artificial Pokémon in a test tube. “I always thought that I’d probably never be able to draw cards that people would like better than [the original Pikachu or Charizard cards], but recently, I’m getting a lot of good feedback on this Mewtwo, so maybe there’s a chance.”


ミュウツーGX
HP 190
フルバースト
30×
このポケモンについているエネルギーの数×30ダメージ。
ちょうきゅうしゅう
60
このポケモンのHPを「30」回復する。
サイコブレイクGX
200
このワザのダメージは、相手のバトルポケモンにかかっている効果を計算しない。[対戦中、自分はGXワザを1回しか使えない。]
弱点 ×2
抵抗力
にげる
GXルール
ポケモンGXがきぜつしたとき、相手はサイドを2枚とる。
Illus.Mitsuhiro Arita
082/072
©2017 Pokémon/Nintendo/Creatures/GAME FREAK

Artist Mitsuhiro Arita is responsible for some of the most classic Pokémon trading card art, as well as more current favorites like a recent GX Mewtwo (right)



With so little room to convey meaningful stories through cards, the team lets the art do most of the talking. Nagashima isn't opposed to exploring other ways of conveying the story of a set in the future, however

CREATING CRITTERS

After our interview, we see the part of the Creatures offices where everyone works. Brushing past a large cluster of packed cubicles where employees enjoy their lunch hour, we're quickly taken to the main attraction: A closed-off room meant specifically for Arita and the other artists who work on Pokémon cards to draw in peace. Though Arita does much of his work at his home office, he comes to work in this space on more confidential projects, such as art for cards based on Pokémon which have yet to release.

Arita estimates that, from beginning to end, the process of creating art of an individual card can take about seven weeks, though the actual amount of time he spends putting pen to paper varies between cards.

First, Arita receives the order to make the card from Creatures telling him which Pokémon he's drawing, as well as details about that critter, specific poses, and any themes the company may want conveyed. When it comes to some of the shinier cards (and the more dense full-card art pieces), Creatures also makes decisions about specific holographic patterns as well, though artists do make requests to have certain parts of a card shine according to their own vision.

Choosing an art style for each set can be a lengthy process. Art director Satoru Nagaya first chooses an overall art style based on the Pokémon which are prominently featured in the set. When testing a new art style, the team will return to a few specific Pokémon with recognizable silhouettes, most of which tend to be the iconic "starter" Pokémon most players and fans will recognize. These Pokémon are also used when testing new artists on whether their style will fit the company's needs, determining their ability to create accurate portrayals of Pokémon and delivering the art on time.

Once Nagaya has an overall sense of which style he wants, he'll work with the company's pool of 73 freelancers to find which artists might best fit that direction. Some artists will occasionally choose which Pokémon and styles they'd like to work with, but ultimately, it's up to the art team to dictate which cards are drawn by which artist.

Arita begins his first draft using pencil on common A4-size paper, though some art styles require working with digital tools right away. He pulls up an in-progress draft of a card featuring Lurantis coyly posing in a tropical clearing. The theme for this set is the Alola region, which means that, along with making Lurantis look detailed and colorful, giving each card a sense of place is important. As such, while Arita is a fan of the simpler backgrounds of the past, this one is fairly dense, with several "local" objects like coconuts and hibiscus flowers using a sharp blue sky. The template Arita uses to draw also has a frame with the dimensions for typical Pokémon card art, letting him see what parts of the art he's working will fit into it.

Arita then shows us several in-progress stages of the same drawing, starting with simple colors outlining the overall tones of the card, then complexifying with more layers over time. If, as in this set, the focus is a location, then it could take some additional time to layer on all the complex background details. Other times, such as when he drew a promotional variant of the card Giovanni's Scheme, Arita will turn to other forms of art for inspiration (for Giovanni's Scheme, he used classical portrait paintings as a reference). When the art of the set emphasizes a realistic look, some artists will even go as far as creating plastic figures of Pokémon to photograph for certain cards.

Once the artist completes a draft, The Pokémon Company takes its own look at the card. "They sometimes find things that need to get fixed," Nagashima says. "Sometimes they'll come back with comments like, 'No, this Pokémon doesn't have this shape,' and we'll fix that type of thing." If the team has a specific setting in mind (such as Alola), Creatures will be a little more hands-on about how it wants a card to look. The process goes back and forth between the artist, Creatures, and The Pokémon Company until it's complete and ready for printing.

When drawing new cards, Arita likes to keep in mind how a simple background can leave a big impression. "Sometimes I'll even go back to my old, simple designs and take learnings from those to keep that impact important," he says

Testers hold whatever information they collect over the course of several hours of play in their heads, then submit play reports cataloging their thoughts on how individual cards and strategies are faring

GOTTA TEST ’EM ALL

Near the back of the Creatures office is a room lined with glass walls. As we’re led inside this room for the last stop on our tour, I notice the back wall is lined by a dozen or so cabinets, which we’re told contain just about every card that has ever been released for the Pokémon TCG. The people who normally occupy this room need them to do their jobs.

The most important requirement to becoming a part of the group of 19 testers who spend most of their week here is simple: Be a fan of Pokémon and card games. You don’t have to be a top-level player to get in the door; in fact, depending on Creatures’ needs at the time, not being a competitive player may even help your chances, since the testing and design teams place a large emphasis on making the game as accessible as it is competitive.

While specific feedback on individual cards varies, the design team is looking for assessments on a card’s power level relative to their expectations. Each card is designed with a specific purpose and power level in mind; if a card isn’t meeting these expectations during testing, the designers examine the card and rework it. According to head tester Satoru Inoue, small tweaks are fairly common throughout the testing process, but most of the major changes only happen for the “main” cards in the set, or the more powerful EX/GX cards.

As cards are tested they’re subject to numerous alterations, which means testers have to use “proxy” versions of cards. These are essentially older cards with a sticker on them, displaying the name, stats, and logic of each card as it changes. Each card also displays a picture of the Pokémon it’s tied to, which is more than an aesthetic touch. Designers aren’t just looking for feedback on whether a card works the way it should, but whether the logic matches the Pokémon it represents. Depending on tester feedback, designers will make changes to a card that’s fine functionally to make sure it’s in line with what players expect from a specific Pokémon.

From beginning to end, the team playtests situations where one player is much stronger than the other. Part of making the game accessible is ensuring the strongest cards can in fact help newer players defeat veterans, under the right circumstances. This means making sure a card’s power is easy to understand and utilize, and that it behaves consistently across matchups between players of all skill levels.

As a set becomes closer to being final (and proxies give way to final iterations with finished artwork), matches between the best testers tend to become more competitive and intense. After all, it’s better to win than lose no matter your skill level, right?

AN EVER-EVOLVING GAME

Even after months of testing, iterating, and prep between both designers and testers, Nagashima admits his team is often surprised by some of the plays they see once the set is out in the wild. While the team builds sets with particular strategies and decks in mind, cards and combinations often come out of left field, as well as decks they weren’t expecting to be viable being extremely powerful.

A few cards have even managed to grow beyond their wildest expectations. Lysandre's Trump Card, for example, ended up becoming much more powerful than anticipated in the metagame. “People came up with a way to really exploit that card to kind of ruin the game, and make it take a very long time,” Nagashima says. In that particular instance, the team decided the best move was to ban the card entirely, rather than attempt to rework it or release new cards to fix it. “I went to a tournament to actually see people playing it, and saw just how bad it was getting with that card, and I had to come back and talk to my boss, apologize, and get it banned.”

While the team pays close attention to the meta of the TCG and addresses major issues, they tend to focus on moving forward when making new sets, rather than try to “fix” older strategies. However, with real-world value being attached to every card, the team likes to take underplayed cards and make sure players get more value out of them using newer sets. “That makes a lot of the people who have those cards really happy,” Nagashima says.

Because Nagashima and his design team are working a year in advance on new cards, it can be hard to anticipate synergies that players might uncover that need to be fixed in upcoming sets. But that’s something that comes with the territory; if the team were able to predict everything players were capable of, the Pokémon TCG wouldn’t be as fun. While creating sets is a large and arduous process, it’s been worth the effort for over 20 years now, helping grow one of the most popular brand names in the world. The development involves dozens of people helping to design, draw, and test cards that, hopefully, will hold a special place in players’ hearts. And with any luck, it’ll keep working for at least 20 more.

Finding Streaming Success

How a chance opportunity led to a whole new career

Ben Cassell, aka Cohh Carnage, was thrust into the streaming spotlight by guildmates who just wanted to check out how a new game played. Today, Cohh commands a huge following on Twitch, streaming a variety of games that are well off the beaten path compared to the battle royales, competitive shooters, and MOBAs that dominate the front page.

Name:
Ben Cassell

Occupation:
Streamer

Twitch:
CohhCarnage

Twitter:
@CohhCarnage

Website:
cohh.tv

interview by Daniel Tack

How did you get into gaming?
I've been gaming my entire life. It's always been, not only an escape for me but just a deep-seated passion. Back in the days when I had to spend 16 hours downloading the first EverQuest expansion, I absolutely loved them. Another thing I like to tell people is basically I grew up in Norrath, which is the world of EverQuest. I pretty much spent more time there during the day than awake in reality, for a nice big chunk of my life. And that kinda helped shape everything else that I did moving forward. But it's kinda the same reason I've been streaming every single day for five years now. And I get the question, "Don't you ever get bored of it?" No! I don't! I'm a gamer, that's what I do. I'm the guy that's gonna be opening up the gaming retirement homes here in about 20 years. Basically, live games, breathe games – the whole deal.

So what took you from EverQuest to becoming a streamer?
It was from a guild I was leading at the time. They said, "Hey, this game is coming out called Defiance, can you show it to us? You can show it to us and we can see if it's worth the money." So I had no clue what I was doing and my first stream was streaming Defiance. Over the course of that week, I didn't just discover what Twitch was, but I realized, "Wait a second, people do this for a living." I had this moment where I was like, "This is my dream job."

Sure enough, I decided at that point that I was going for it. Initially, I tried to brute force Twitch. And it worked for a while completely by luck. I was streaming 12-16 hours a day. I was getting hundreds of follows a day. I played Defiance for a month and moved to Neverwinter. And then…then I went on vacation for a week.

Was there a lot of falloff?
It was almost soul-crushing. When I came back my max viewership was about a third from when I had left. Not understanding how Twitch worked, I then said, "Oh, I need to stream harder!" And for almost a month, every day I would have less viewers than the day before. It was really bad; I was losing weight, I wasn't thinking. So I took about a week off and when I came back I made three critical changes. I started streaming on a schedule – I moved to 8 am EDT. I also said, "If this is going to be a job, I need to give it every bit of effort like working a day job." And I decided to go safe for work – "If I'm gonna do this, it's gonna be a show. It's gonna be something that I could see on television." And that's when everything started to come together.

So what would you say to someone trying to get into streaming today?
I would tell them that on the very first day I started streaming there were multiple people telling me that it was too late to get started. The very first day. "Nope, Twitch is oversaturated, there's no way you can make it yourself, there's no way this is gonna work." So the thing I would tell new people is, if you're just gonna turn on your computer and stream and hope to be successful, that might work for half a percent of people. But if you are serious about succeeding on Twitch you need to find a niche. There are millions of things that have never been done before and thousands of interesting character types and things you could do. And those people are going to be the ones that succeed.

A good example is Dr. Disrespect. This is a guy who was relatively successful on YouTube and he brought this character, this super alpha machismo character to Twitch. Within weeks he was shoulder to shoulder with the top people in the games he would stream. If you can come up with something people want to see, separate yourself and differentiate yourself, you can find a way to be successful. But on the same note, streaming is exactly like acting. You can be the best actor in the world that has 12 years of professional training, you could live in Hollywood and meet an amazing director every single day – there's still a chance you'll never make it. If you want to go far, you have to do something interesting and different.

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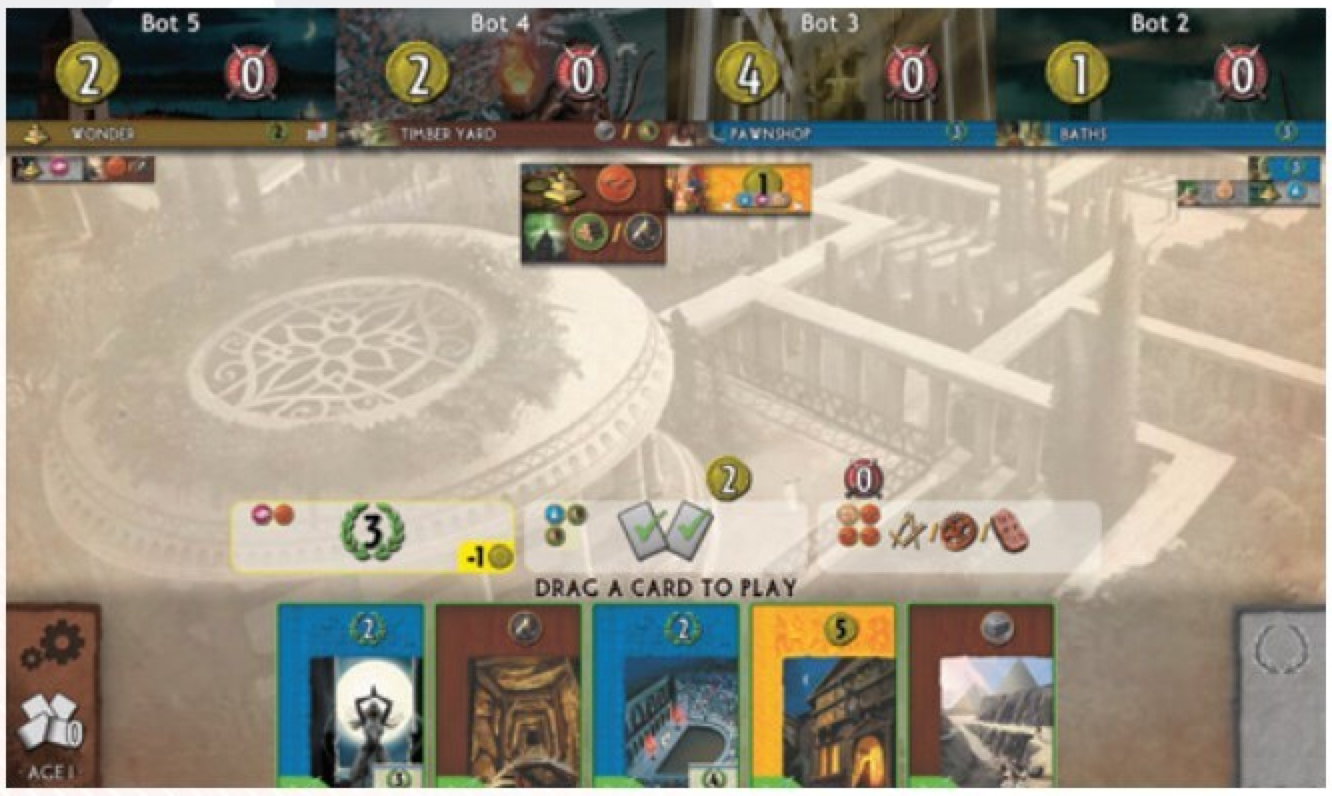
Tabletop Gaming Goes Digital

Board gaming's best and brightest are revitalizing the mobile landscape

Smartphones offer tantalizing potential for gaming on the go, but you wouldn't know it from all the free-to-play microtransaction traps that plague Apple and Google's mobile markets. Dig a little deeper, however, and you'll discover a mobile gaming renaissance is underway courtesy of an old-school source. The world's biggest board game publishers are embracing the mobile format in full force, offering up fun and endlessly replayable digital translations of their greatest games. Best of all, most publishers are using traditional up-front pricing for their digital offerings. Unlike many mobile games, you won't have to worry about any time gates, premium currencies, or intrusive ads ruining the fun.

Below you'll find a collection of some of our favorite digital board games, from light and breezy dice chuckers to brain-burning strategy titles. ***by Jeff Marchiafava***



7 WONDERS

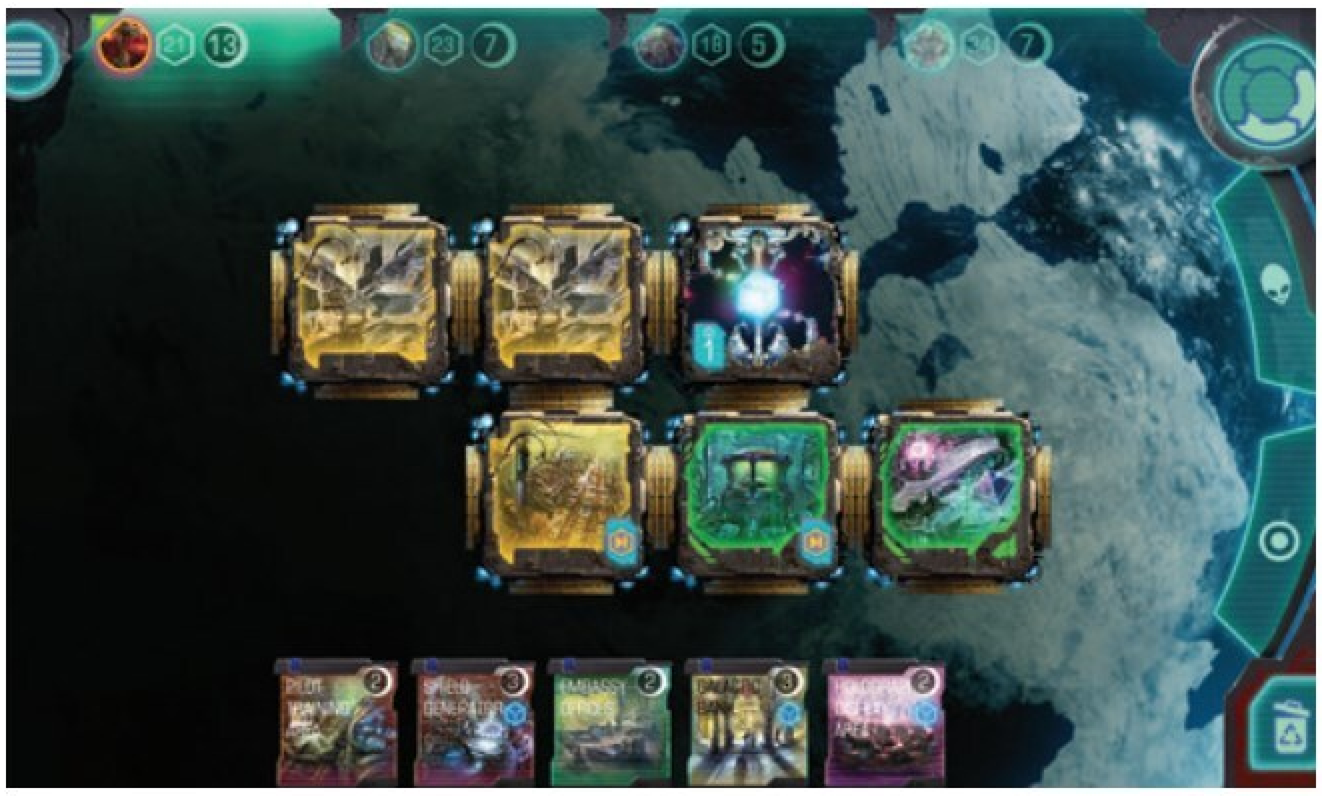
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Repos Production

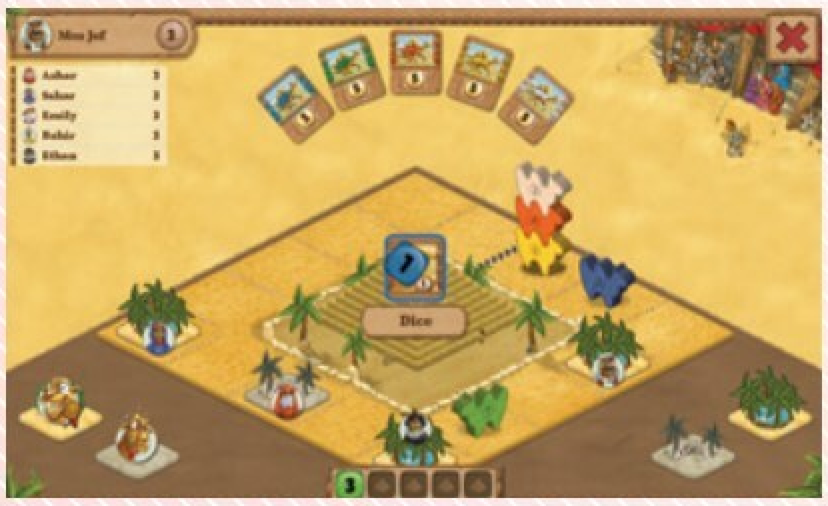
Repos Production's digital adaptation turns 7 Wonders' superb mix of card drafting and set collection into a five-minute affair that's perfect for gaming on the go. Players lead their legendary city through three distinct ages by passing around and selecting cards worth various resources, bonuses, and victory points. Up to seven players can compete online to construct their own wonder of the ancient world, but its completion is far from the only scoring opportunity demanding your attention.

AMONG THE STARS

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Cublo Games

Among The Stars takes the card-drafting mechanic from games like 7 Wonders into the far reaches of space and beams in a layer of tile placement for good measure. As intergalactic architects, you and three friends compete to see who can build the spiffiest space station. Each room offers its own unique bonuses (often based on positioning), as does the alien race you select at the beginning of the game. If you're a strategy fan with a flair for sci-fi, Among The Stars' ample card and scoring variability make it a meaty option with tons of replay value.





CAMEL UP

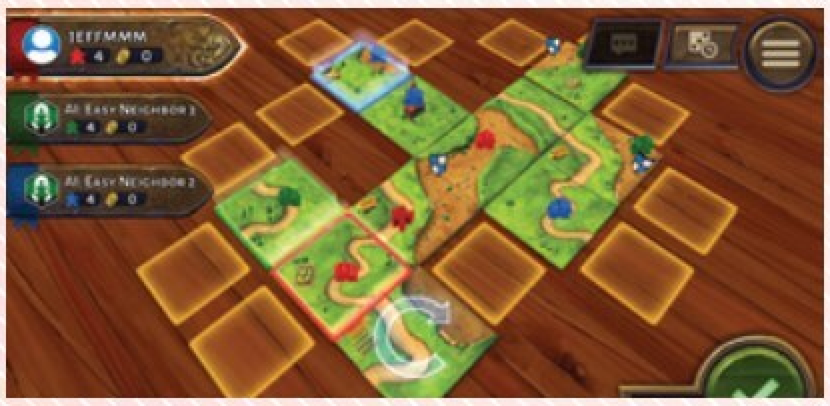
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Outline Development

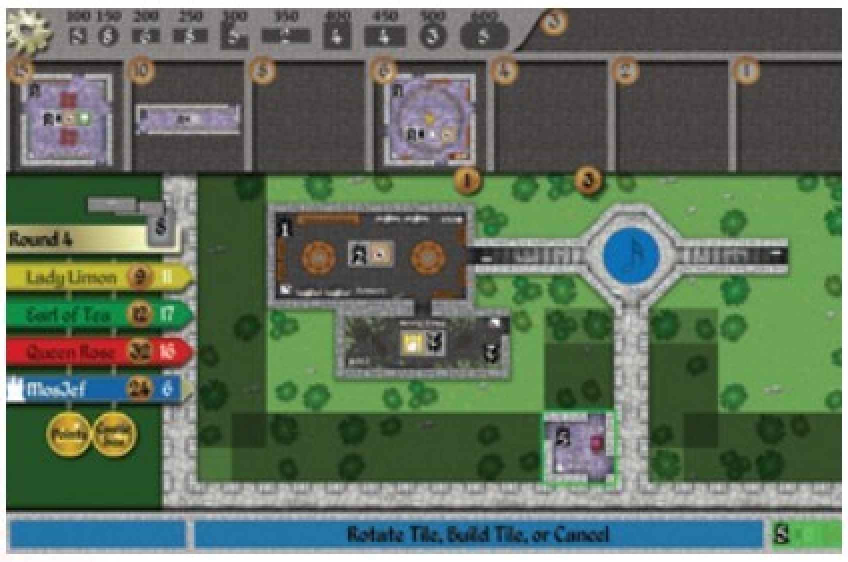
Camel Up's dice pyramid may not be as fancy on mobile, but the speedier playing time is worth it. Camel Up allows up to eight players to bet on camel contestants in short and chaotic races. On your turn you can help or hinder the racers by placing down oasis/mirage tiles, or place bets on the potential winners and losers. Camels on the same spot stack on top of each other, however, so races never quite turn out the way you expect – but don't let that stop you from over-betting!

CARCASSONNE – TILES & TACTICS

Platform: Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

One of tabletop gaming's most prolific titles, Carcassonne has players reshaping the French countryside by placing a series of grass, road, and town tiles. A variety of scoring options allow you to adapt to the luck of the draw as your shared town slowly expands across the virtual table. Asmodee Digital spared no expense with its mobile adaptation, offering a full selection of single-player, pass-and-play, and online matchmaking options, in addition to the sharp 3D visuals. A different version of the game is available on iOS from publisher TheCodingMonkeys.

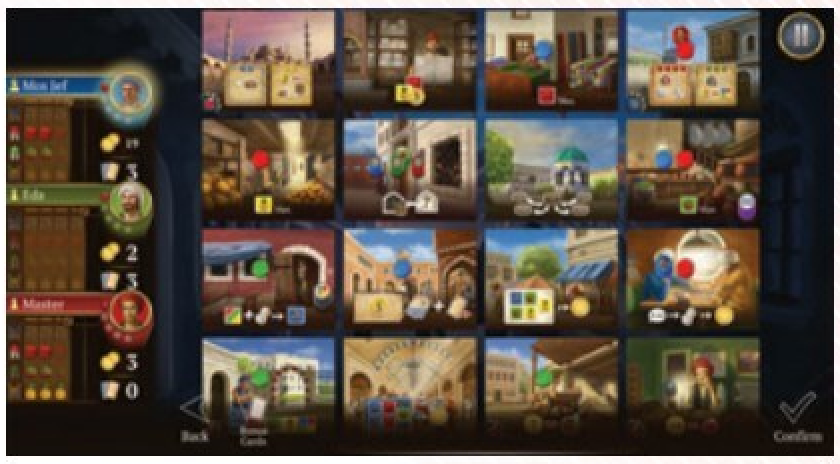


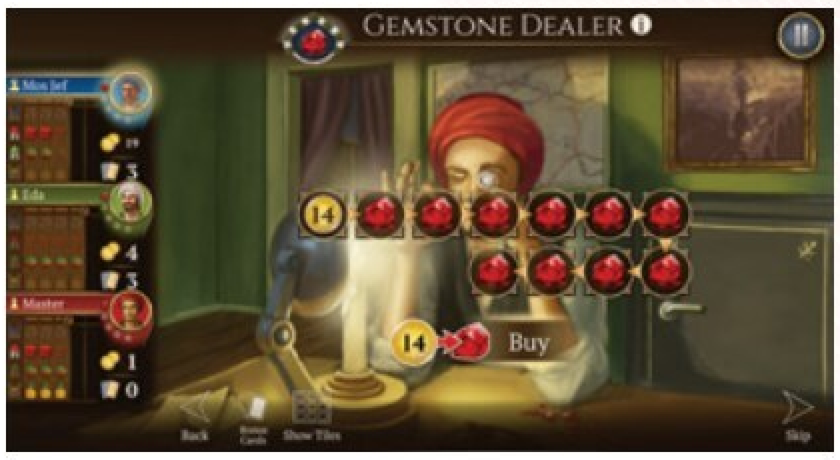


CASTLES OF MAD KING LUDWIG

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Bezier Games

Being king of the castle is hard enough – actually building the castle is a whole different story. Mad King Ludwig's clever bidding system lets players set the prices for their opponents as they all buy individual rooms and piece them together into the (hopefully) perfect floorplan. Multiplayer is limited to pass-and-play, but competent A.I. and a lengthy solo campaign will keep you busy regardless.





ISTANBUL: DIGITAL EDITION

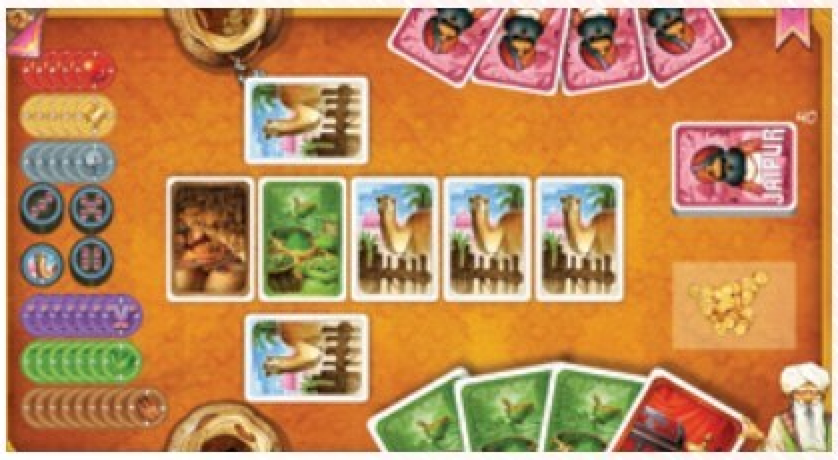
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Acram Digital

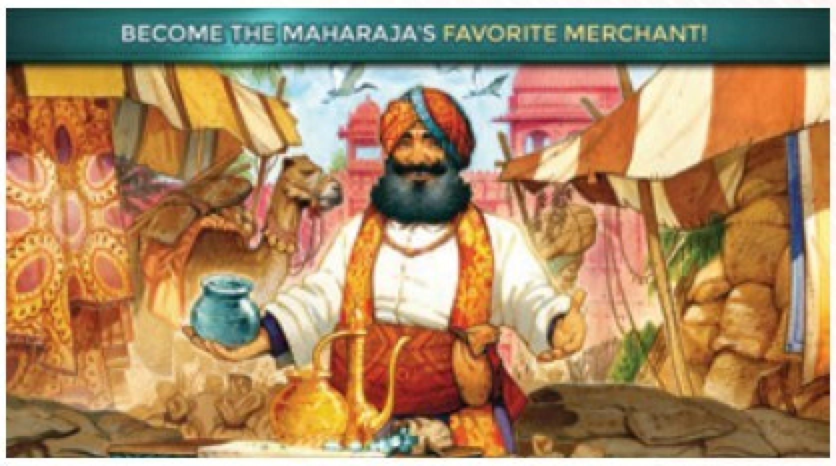
There's no shortage of board games based on trading goods in a foreign country (like the next entry, for instance), but Istanbul stands out for its modular board and intriguing assistant mechanic, which requires you to leave behind one of your helpers in order to activate each location's unique ability. A wealth of trading opportunities makes Istanbul's race to collect gems tactically rich without being too overly complicated – but if you do ever find yourself confused, the app's helpful explainers are only a tap away.

JAIPUR: A CARD GAME OF DUELS

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

Jaipur's vibrant art and fast-paced card trading have been delighting tabletop duos for years, and it only takes a few minutes to see why. The simple actions of buying and trading sets of goods (and all-important camels!) are complicated by a clever scoring system that keeps you guessing until the end. The digital version's full-fledged campaign can keep solo traders busy for a long time, while the nifty pass-and-play implementation speeds up the already quick two-player matches for a fast and fun competition.

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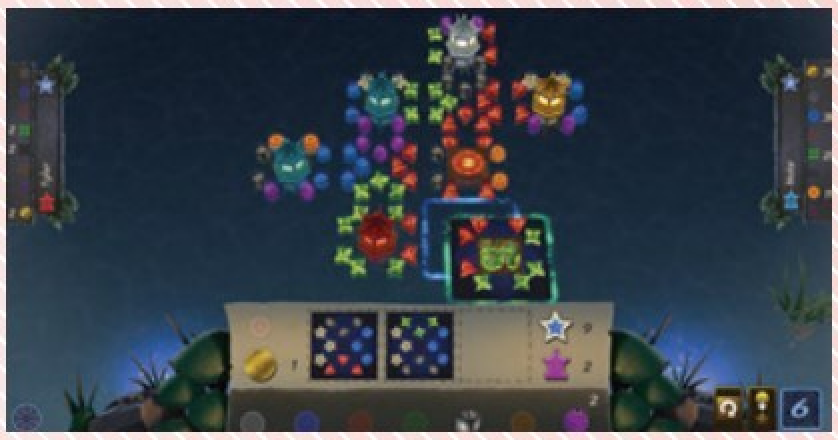
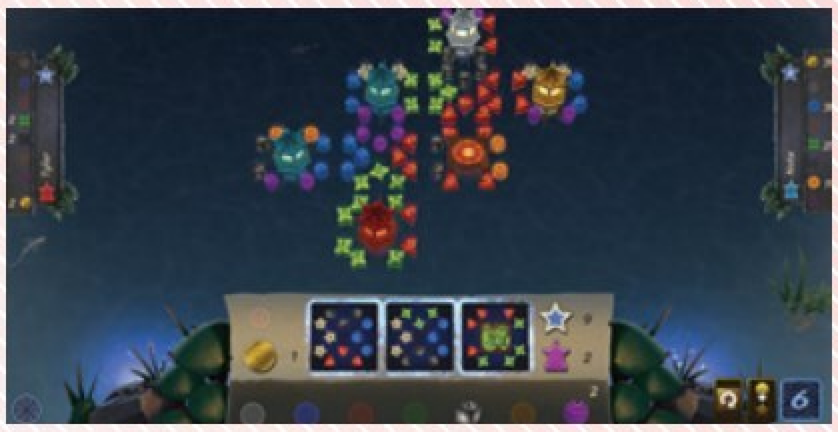




LANTERNS: THE HARVEST FESTIVAL

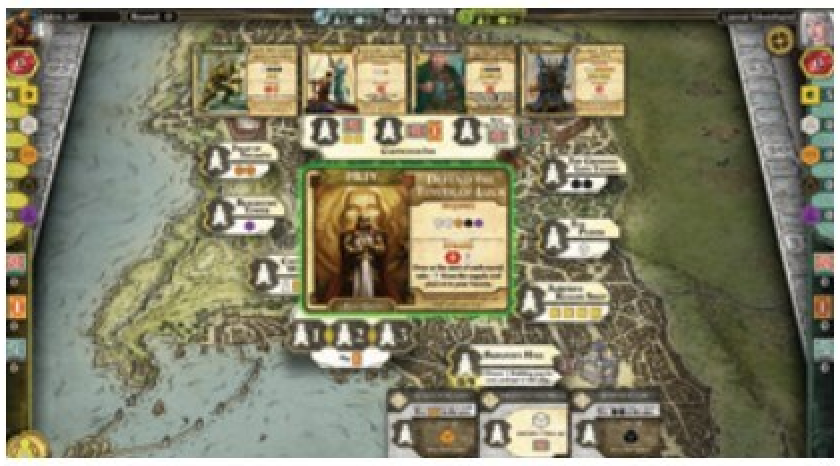
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Dire Wolf Digital

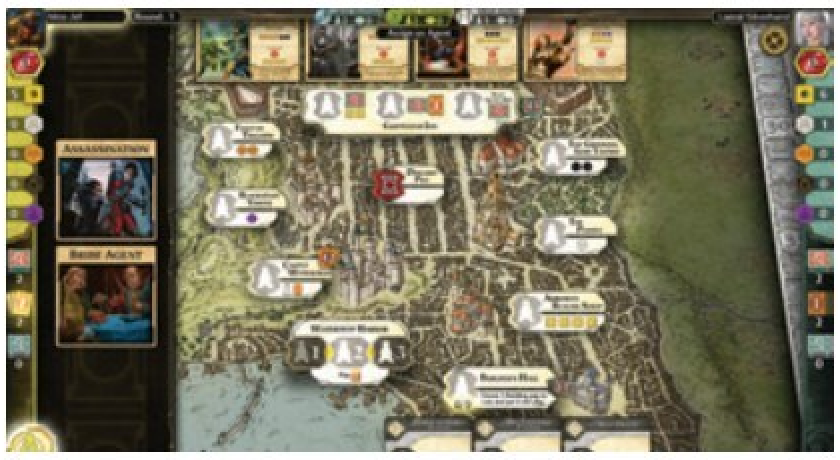
This short and sweet tile-placement game has players competing for the emperor's favor by arranging floating lanterns for the annual Harvest Festival. Whenever a multicolored tile is placed, everyone receives a lantern corresponding to the side facing them, so judicious use of matching bonuses and favor tokens are required to win the most honor. The app also includes The Emperor's Gifts expansion free of charge, which adds interesting new wrinkles and scoring opportunities to this family-weight strategy title.

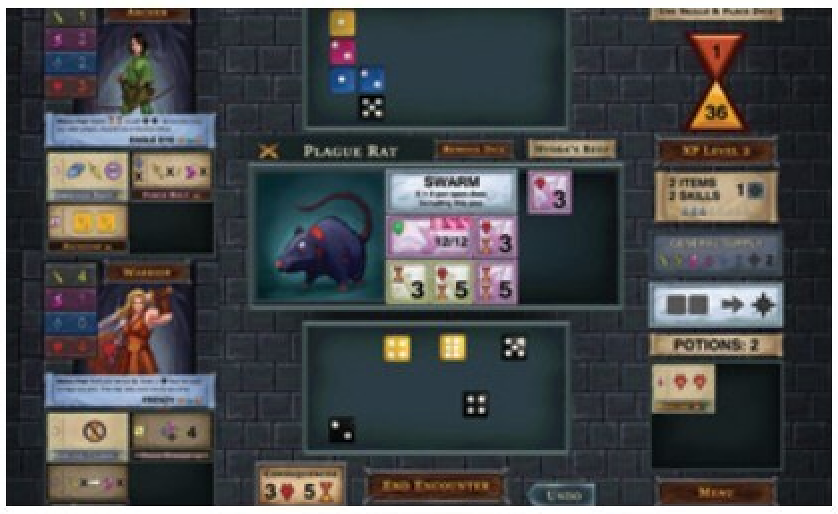
LORDS OF WATERDEEP

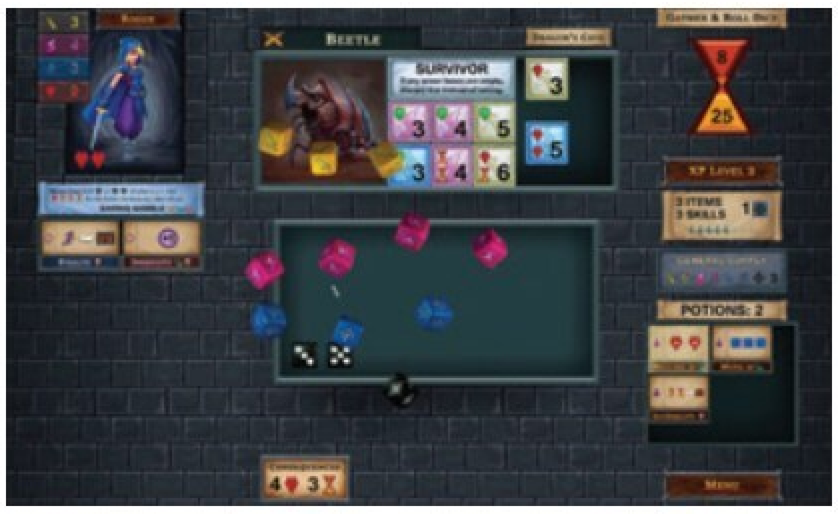
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Playdek, Inc.

You don't have to be a Dungeons & Dragons fan to enjoy Lords of Waterdeep's satisfying array of options on any given turn. The medium-weight worker placement game tasks you with moving your agents around the city to recruit new adventurers, complete quests, and – most importantly – interfere with your opponents' own dastardly schemes. The app version offers speedier play and detailed scoring breakdowns, along with simple 3D effects and animations that inject life into the gorgeous, hand-drawn map.









ONE DECK DUNGEON

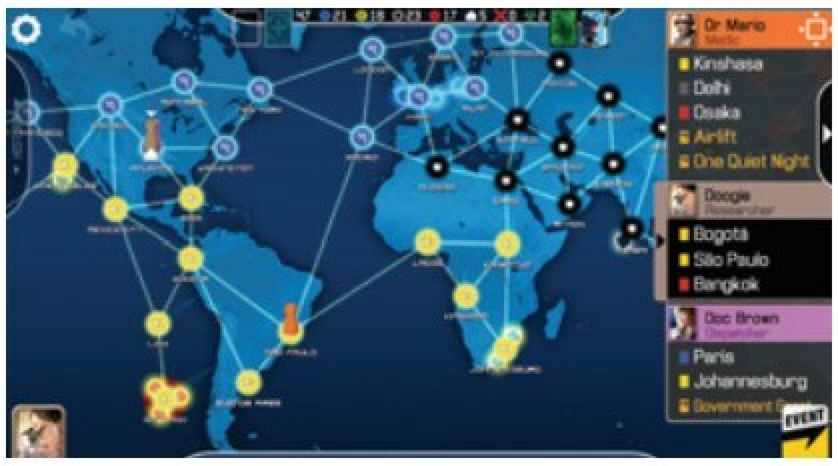
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Handelabra Games

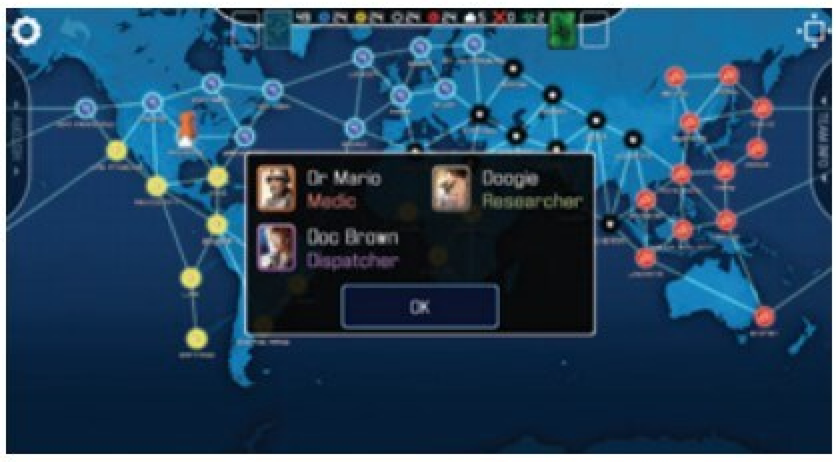
Available on tablets, One Deck Dungeon provides a fun roguelike dungeon crawl for one or two players. Each outing you choose between five different classes, with colored dice representing your strength, agility, and magic stats. Manipulating those dice via special powers to best all sorts of minions, traps, and bosses is a captivating and surprisingly challenging puzzle that doesn't get old.

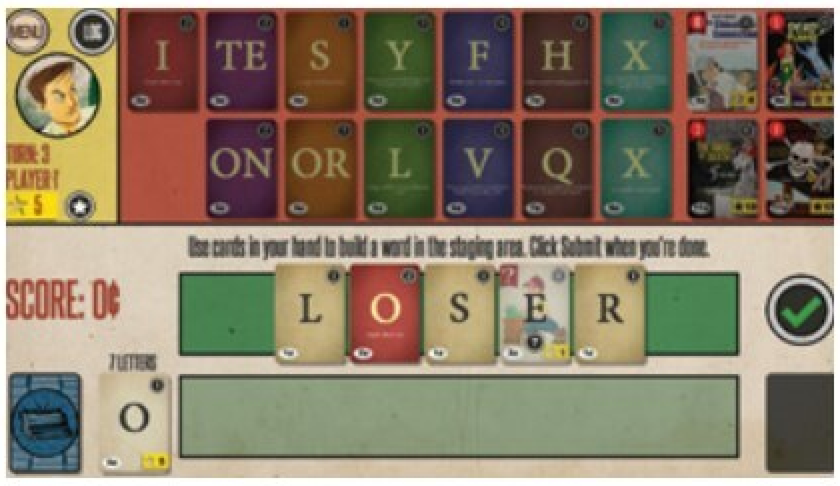
PANDEMIC: THE BOARD GAME

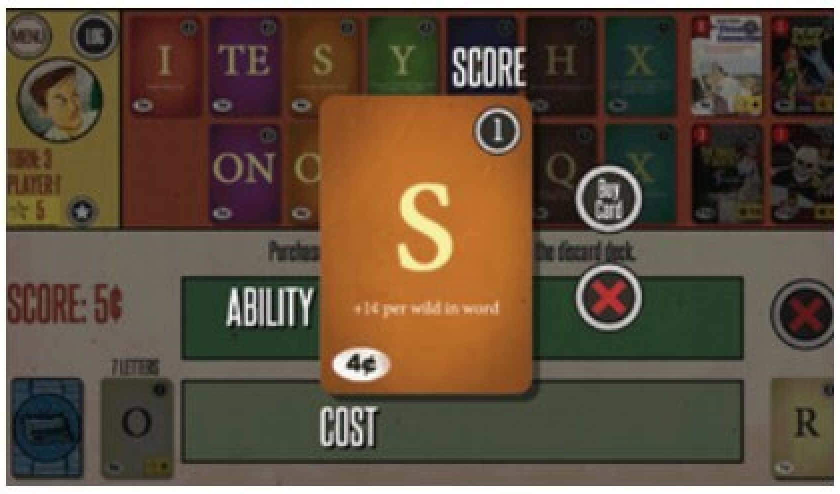
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

Those looking for a less confrontational experience can't go wrong with Pandemic's intense cooperative puzzle that tasks you with stopping four deadly diseases from ravaging the globe. Up to four players must coordinate their resources and unique special abilities if they hope to stem the snowballing outbreaks. Most games of Pandemic are meticulously balanced nail-biters, and the app's slick interface makes plotting your next (and hopefully not last) move easier than ever.






SCORE: 0¢
L O S E R
Use cards in your hand to build a word in the staging area. Click Submit when you're done.


SCORE
S
ABILITY
COST
SCORE: 5¢
4¢

PAPERBACK

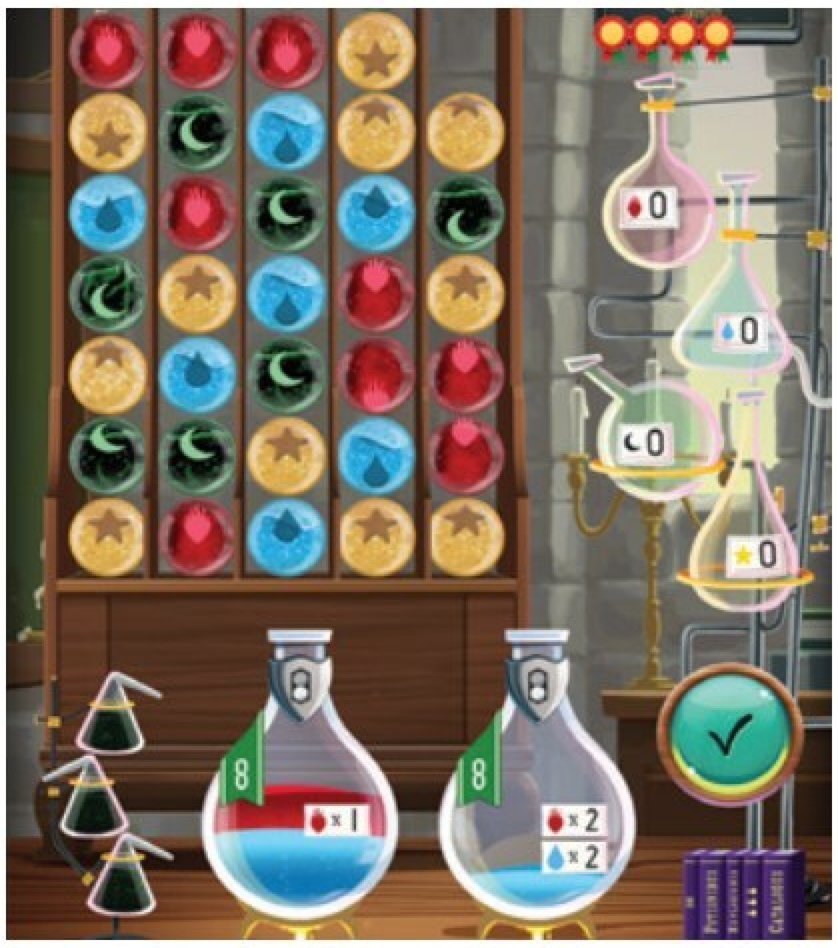
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Fowers Games

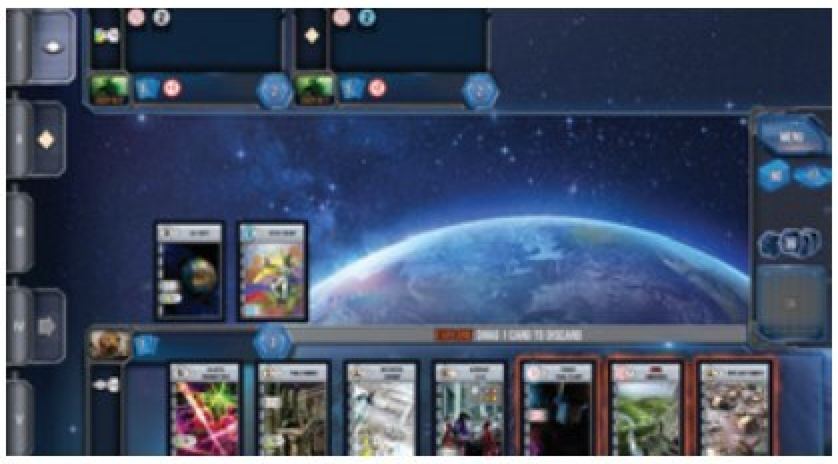
Word game fans ready to move beyond the countless Scrabble and Boggle clones on mobile should check out Tim Fowers' editorial twist on deck building. Each card you add to your deck in Paperback contains letters and gameplay bonuses you can use to form bigger and more lucrative words on subsequent turns. Buying novel cards is the primary method of earning victory points, but they are just as fun to collect for their pulpy cover art.

POTION EXPLOSION

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

Potion Explosion's orb-collecting mechanic has more than a little in common with match-three games, so a digital port was a no-brainer – and Asmodee Digital knocked it out of the park with its exceptional presentation and animations. Potion Explosion casts players as wannabe wizards, who use the shared ingredient board to complete spells for their demanding professors. Each spell also grants a unique buff that can be used to trigger even bigger chain reactions – and more intense rivalries.



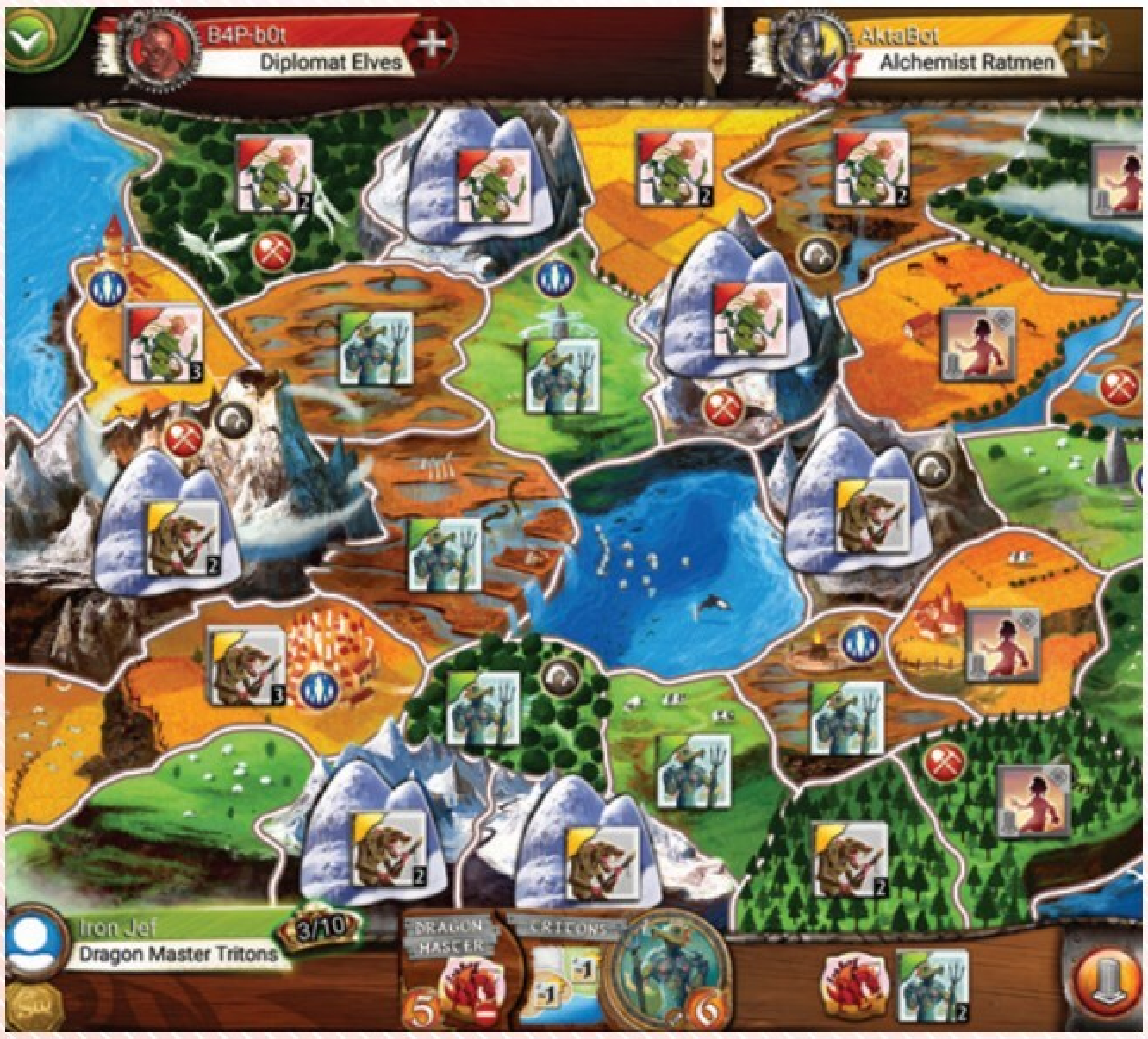


PROSPEROUS WORLD
DISCARD

RACE FOR THE GALAXY

Platform: IOS, Android
Publisher: Temple Gates Games LLC

Don't let Race For The Galaxy's appearance fool you – this isn't another mobile CCG designed to funnel you toward buying more card packs. The base game provides everything you need for a sublime and highly replayable engine-building experience, as you research new technologies, colonize planets, and ship goods across the galaxy one card at a time. Learning the iconography takes a while, but the competent A.I., well-rounded multiplayer options, and solid expansions are worth the investment.


B4P-b0t
Diplomat Elves
AktaBot
Alchemist Ratmen
Iron Jef
Dragon Master Tritons
3/10
DRAGON MASTER
TRITONS

SMALL WORLD 2

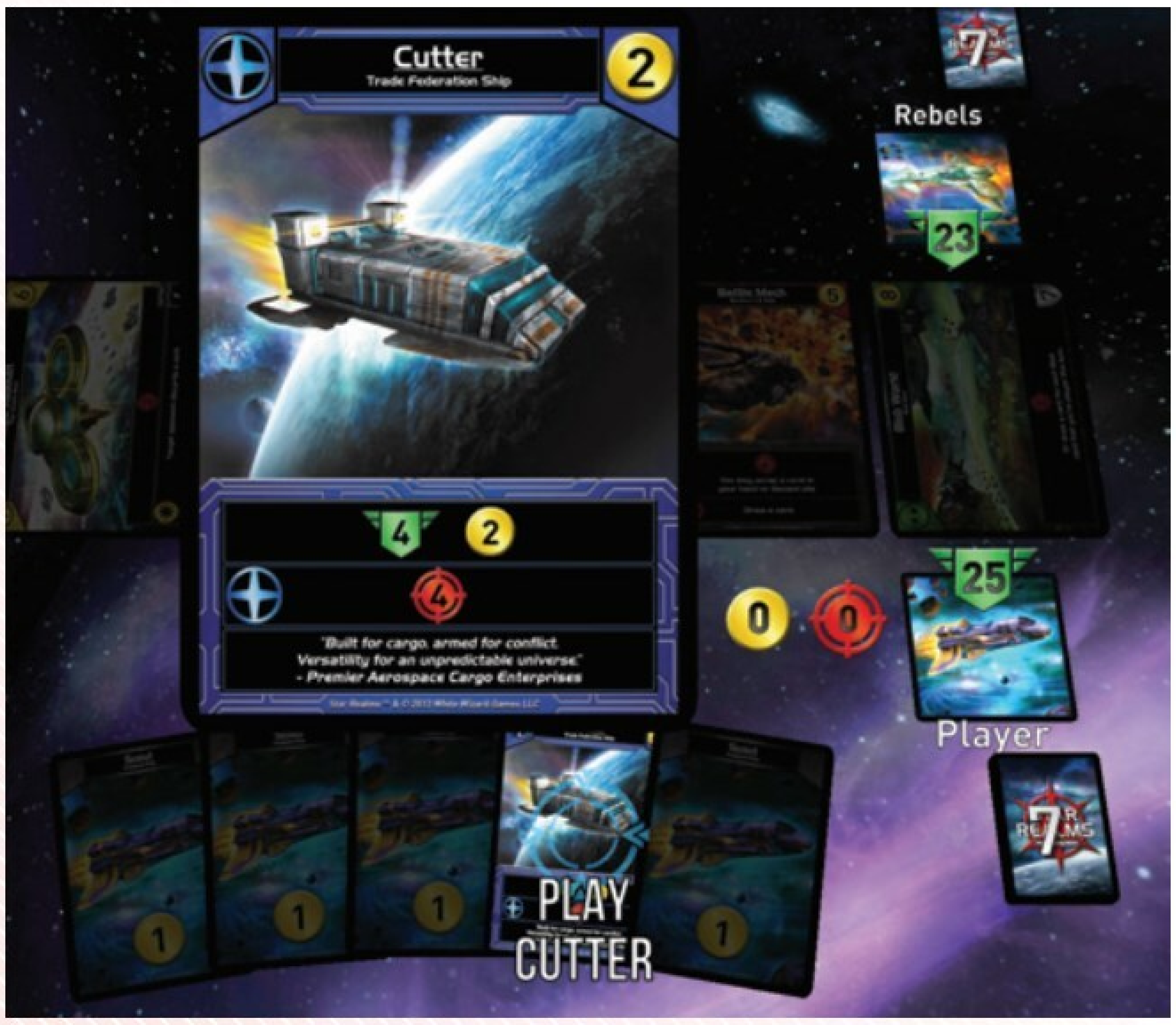
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

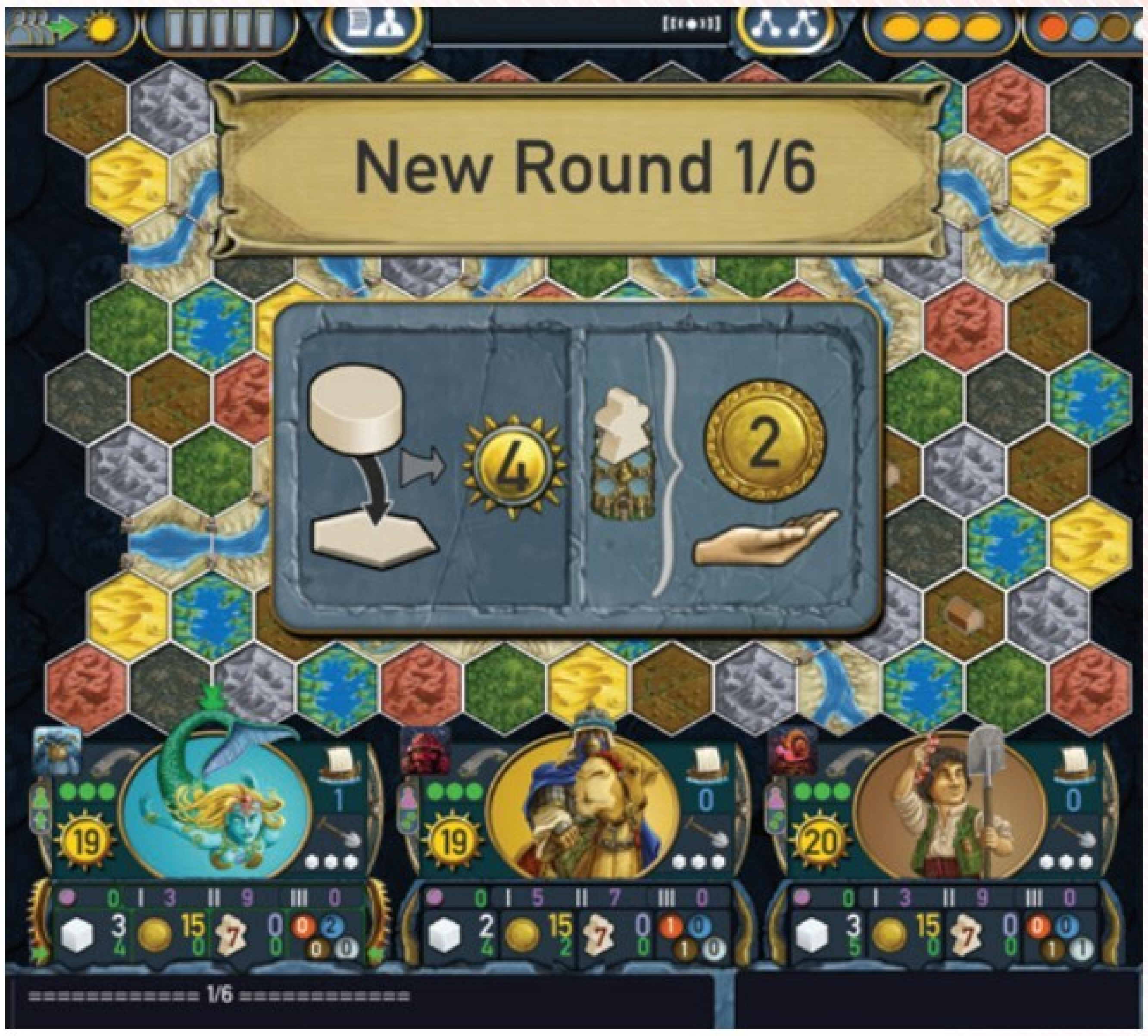
Small World's rollicking take on area control is perfectly suited to digital platforms thanks to the app automating all of the upkeep between rounds. Players clash over Small World's cartoony landscape via a number of fantasy races, each of which is randomly paired with a powerful ability at the beginning of the game. Once your current faction starts losing muster, you can swap them out for another, leading to exciting swings in map control and scores.

STAR REALMS

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: White Wizard Games

A sci-fi take on deck building, Star Realms offers short head-to-head matches full of strategic considerations. Players must best their opponent's fleet by skillfully drafting ship and star base cards from four distinct factions that all sport their own special abilities and powerful combos. Buying the base game gives you access to a challenging solo campaign, as well pass-and-play and online multiplayer. A variety of reasonably priced expansions are also available if you're eager to explore new corners of the galaxy.


Cutter
Trade Federation Ship
2
Rebels
23
25
Player
PLAY
CUTTER



TERRA MYSTICA

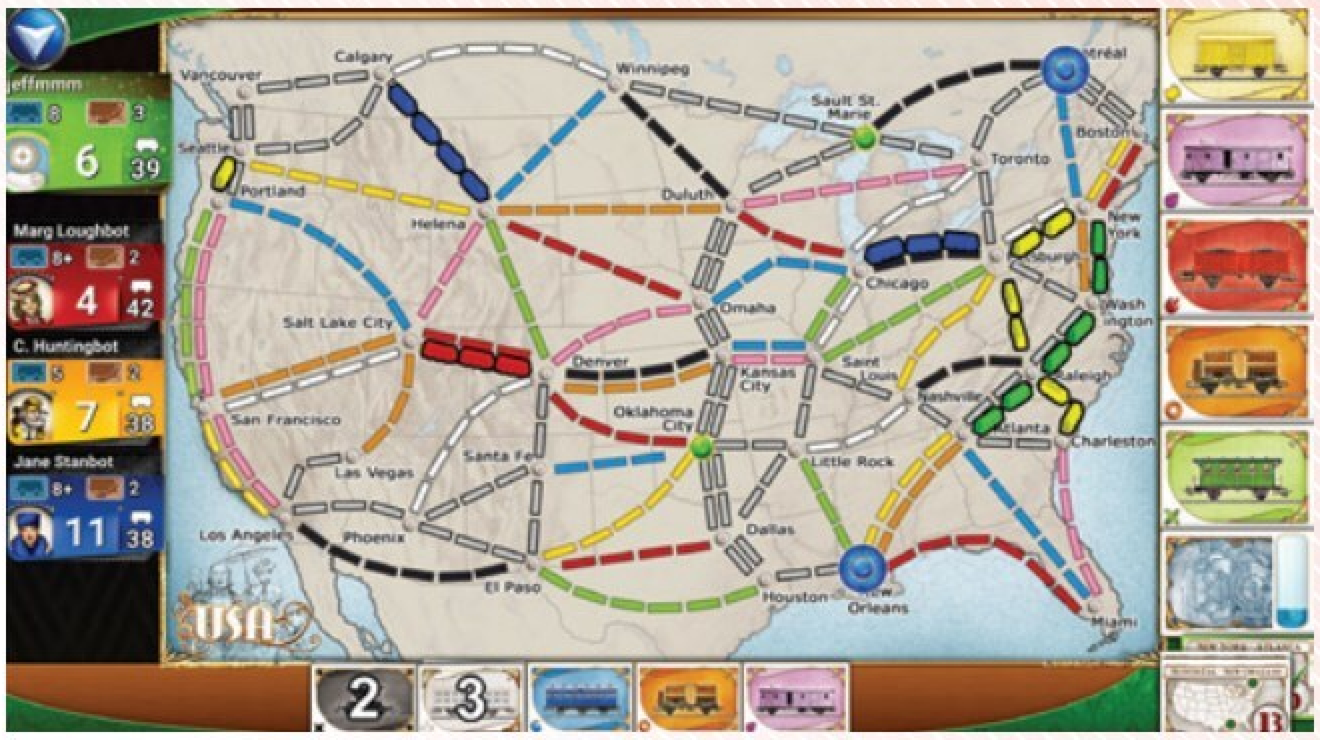
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Digidiced

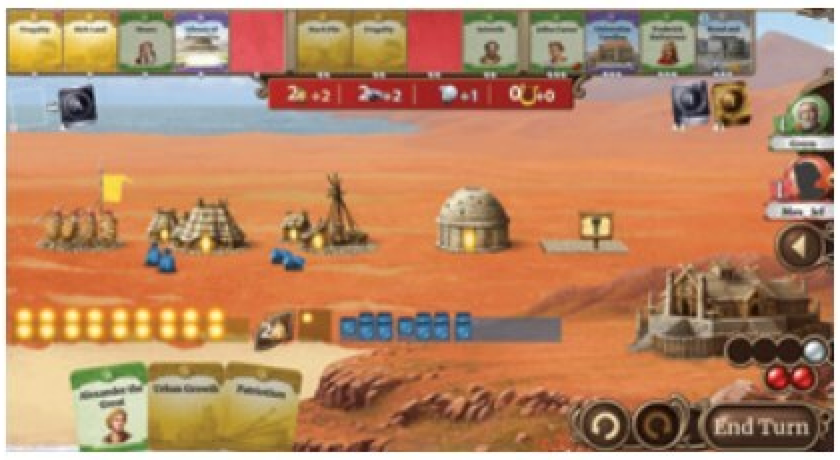
Those looking for a deeper strategy experience can find plenty to mull over in Terra Mystica's intricate web of area control, network building, and resource management. Players choose between 14 unique races, then fight for power and territory by terraforming the fantasy landscape to their faction. Throw in a ton of variable powers and scoring opportunities that change from one game to the next and you've got a compelling strategy title that genuinely feels different every time you play.

TICKET TO RIDE

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

Even if you don't know much about board games, there's a good chance you've heard of Ticket To Ride. In Alan R. Moon's modern-day classic, up to five players compete to collect sets of same-colored train cards in order to claim routes and connect cities on an increasingly crowded map. Any route cards you don't complete by the end of the game count against you, however, so drawing more is a lucrative but risky proposition. Ticket To Ride's formula may be simple, but as millions of tabletop gamers can attest, it's also impossible to put down. This is doubly true for the mobile version of the game, thanks to its phenomenal presentation, streamlined interface, and speedier play sessions. Players can choose from the full array of solo, online, local, and pass-and-play multiplayer options, and compete for a spot on the global leaderboards. Asmodee also offers a wide selection of Ticket To Ride's copious expansions as paid DLC, providing new variants, gameplay mechanics, and maps from around the globe for those who can't get enough of riding the virtual rails.





THROUGH THE AGES

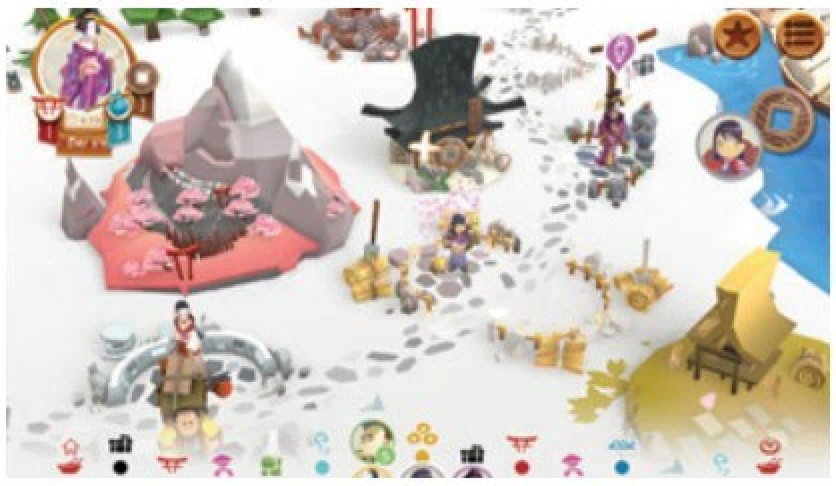
Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: CGE Digital

Through The Ages is one of the highest-ranked tabletop games of all time, but you'll need a spare four hours to enjoy it. The digital version shaves the playing time down to under an hour, while retaining all the complexity and intriguing decisions that go into evolving your own civilization over centuries. A lengthy and surprisingly humorous tutorial eases you into Through The Ages' dense gameplay, before offering a wealth of challenges and multiplayer options to sink your teeth into.

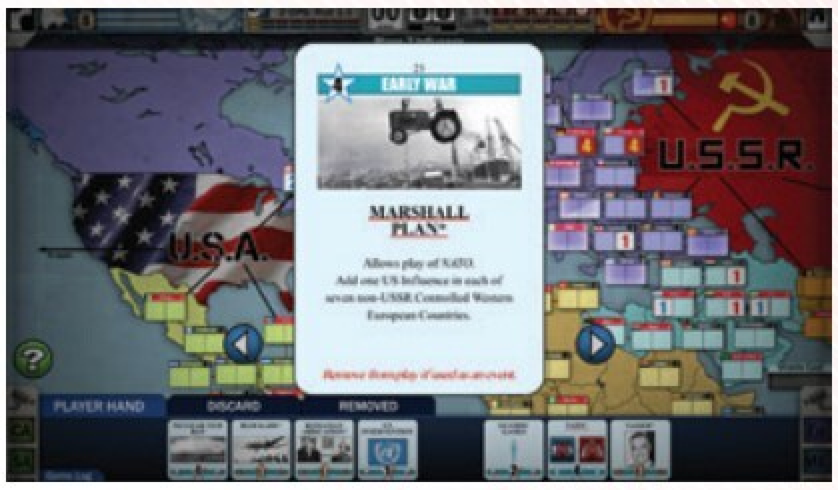
TOKAIDO

Platform: iOS, Android
Publisher: Funforge Digital

Easily the most visually impressive game on this list, Tokaido leaves behind the wooden meeples and two-dimensional track of its tabletop counterpart in favor of a fully 3D representation of Japan's East Sea Road. Players take turns strolling along the route from one location to the next, leapfrogging their opponents and performing a variety of actions that score points in different ways. Tokaido offers the full suite of solo, pass-and-play, and online multiplayer.



Welcome traveler! Each donation to the temple will give you 1 victory point.



TWILIGHT STRUGGLE

Platform: IOS, Android
Publisher: Asmodee Digital

Twilight Struggle isn't the prettiest game on this list – but neither was the tabletop version when it became the highest-rated board game of all time. Two players take control of America and Russia in a clash for world domination that requires deft card play and a little help from the dice gods. Each card is grounded in real-world events from the Cold War, which in turn weaves an enticing alternate history every match. Just try to avoid DEFCON 1, okay? ◆

top ten

CONSTANT COMPANIONS

by Kyle Hilliard

Trico

The Last Guardian

Sure, Trico is stubborn, doesn't listen sometimes, and shoots electricity from its tail, but we still love our feathered friend. The Last Guardian feels like a truly cooperative adventure built entirely on trust in a fully realized virtual partner, and we're still thinking about it years later.

Ellie

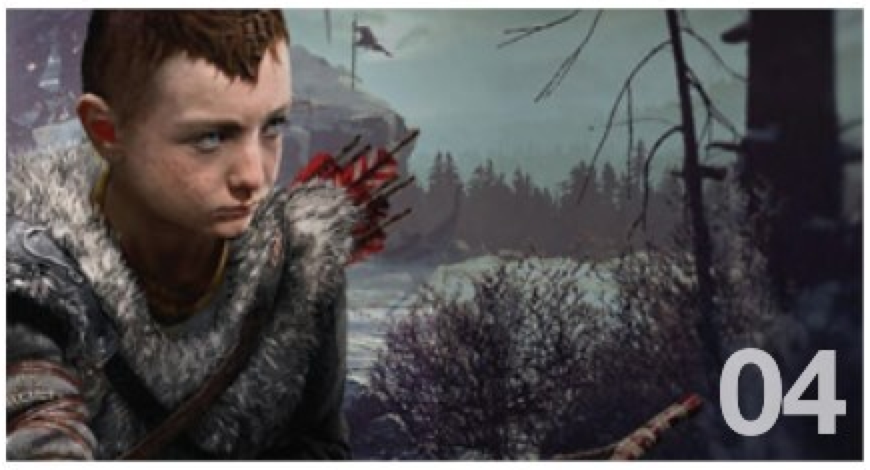
The Last of Us

Ellie has a lot to prove to Joel when they first team up, and she works hard to earn his trust. Whether it's the gameplay mechanics of taking care of her (and Joel!) or laughing in the face of Joel's lack of humor, Ellie is the ray of sunshine in The Last of Us' dreary world.

Clementine

Telltale's The Walking Dead

You play as Lee Everett in the first season of Telltale's The Walking Dead, but Clementine is the star. She's a child in need of your help through the course of the season's five episodes, but you see her grow, learn harsh truths, and come into her own by the end.



Atreus

God of War (2018)

When Sony first revealed Kratos' role as a father for the God of War reboot, we all hoped Atreus would not be annoying. Turns out, he isn't annoying in the slightest. In fact, he is crucial to combat, always lending an important hand. Also, he's generally a good kid.

Elizabeth

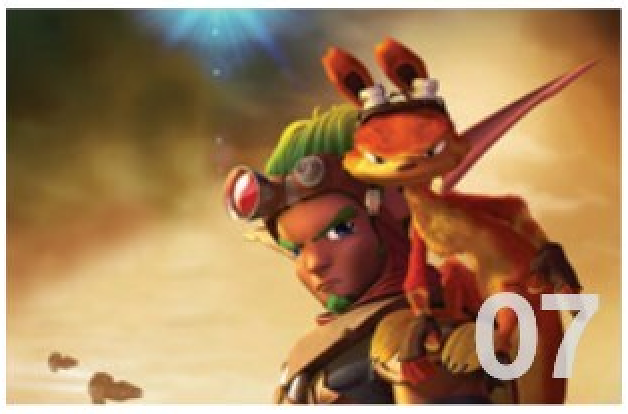
BioShock Infinite

Elizabeth begins BioShock Infinite as a damsel in distress, but sheds that cliched role quickly by proving she is capable of handling herself, and helping you. By the end, she's your main motivation for seeing Infinite's story to its incredible conclusion.

Clank

Ratchet and Clank

Ratchet is a Lombax (whatever that is) and Clank is a robot, but they don't let those differences get in the way of their friendship. Clank is an invaluable tool in your adventure, and is the perfect straight man to Ratchet's humor and unfounded confidence.



Daxter

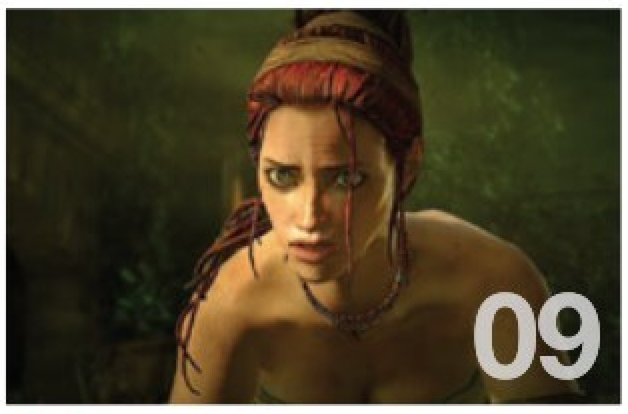
Jak and Daxter

Unlike Clank, Daxter is an obnoxious (but undeniably endearing) comic-relief machine that keeps Jak from having to open his mouth too much. He even got his own spin-off game to fill the narrative gap while Jak was in prison.

Elika

Prince of Persia (2008)

Prince of Persia's 2008 entry is divisive, but few complain about Elika's role in both gameplay and story. You don't play as just the prince – you play as both him and Elika as they work in tandem to explore a vast, beautiful world and save it, whatever the sacrifice.



Trip

Enslaved: Odyssey to the West

With games like Heavenly Sword and Hellblade, developer Ninja Theory has always highlighted the value of good performance capture. This was especially true for Enslaved, where Trip felt like a real person, conflicted about what she needed to do to meet her goals.

Blob

A Boy and His Blob

When it comes to video game partners, it's hard to find one more valuable than the jellybean-eating eponymous blob from Blobolonia. He needs your help, but without his shapeshifting abilities you wouldn't be able to make any progress. So who's the real hero here? ◆

Starburst
UNEXPLAINABLY JUICY™

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photo: Aldo Soares

The Creative Licensor

A 30-year veteran of Ubisoft, chief creative officer Serge Hascoet has his fingerprints on every game the French publisher releases. His editorial staff is currently on a strong run, overseeing the successful reboots of core brands like Assassin's Creed, Rainbow Six, and Ghost Recon. We spoke with Hascoet about the evolution of interactive entertainment.

interview by Matt Bertz

Let's talk about building new IP. There are some interesting examples from Ubisoft where for Assassin's Creed III the Singapore team built the sailing technology, you doubled down on that with Black Flag, and now you're breaking that off and creating a unique pirate brand with Skull & Bones. How do you decide when you want to turn a new gameplay concept into a new brand or bring it into the fold with a pre-existing franchise?
I think there is no one rule. It's case by case. For Skull & Bones, it was the team in Singapore's idea. They proposed to move forward for something like Skull & Bones and we decided it was a good idea to test. It was their choice. Sometimes it's our choice at HQ, sometimes it's their choice. We have to believe in the ideas, and the ideas can come from people who know how to do games. We have to believe in the idea and if we believe in them then we decide to make the game. We moved from Prince of Persia to Assassin's Creed because we thought the prototype was compelling enough to do something new and fresh. Once again it was a team idea. But, it's case by case. You can look at all of our creations, and you can see it's a mix between us – me and my team – the dev team, possibly [Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot]. It's very organic.

How has the editorial team at Ubisoft HQ evolved over the last decade? Do you handle pitches in a similar way or has it changed?
We have a process for the pitch, because otherwise we could have too many pitches, and it can be debilitating for a team to hear "no." We want to protect everybody, so there is a process to go to the studio boss first, and if the studio boss is very happy the pitch comes to me. I have some VPs that handle all the brands, and I have some people around them who are experts in the IP. This pool of very experienced people helps me decide what is good and what could be very successful. Eight years ago, the editorial team was quite small, maybe 10-15 people. And now there are 80.

With Origins and Odyssey, it seems like Assassin's Creed is moving away from the assassin fantasy to enable more player expression to play the way they want to play. Do you worry it's moving too far away from that or do you feel like it's still anchored in that fiction?
We have the same question internally quite often. With Odyssey, we discussed that. I found we are lacking some of the flavor of an assassin, so we are working on that. We don't want to move away. We want to respect the brand, but we also want to improve it. I think the RPG mechanics are really improved, but we need the leap of faith, the sound, all of the good stuff of the previous games.

But I think it was a good decision to move away from the previous fighting systems to the new one. It's added value for the player. We are careful about the brand; we work on it. When you allow the player to customize their character so they can remove the hood, it's okay because this is a player decision. We don't have to force the player to look the way we want them to look. The philosophy we have for all the games is player expression, player freedom, and autonomy of the player.

We once again have Assassin's Creed games in back-to-back years. Are you planning on releasing yearly editions of Assassin's Creed moving forward?
No – it depends. What we did was we built two teams – one in Montreal and one in Quebec – and we wanted to give them enough time. I played Assassin's Creed Odyssey last November, and it was nearly finished. For us it's not a question of annualization, it's more a question of quality. If the team has enough time to produce and polish something, if it's at the highest quality, I think people can enjoy an experience of 80 hours every year. It's possible, but I'm not saying we will have one every year. It's not the plan.

Ezio is almost always named people's favorite assassin. One of the things that separates him from the others is we spent more time with him. He was the star of three games, and we got to live his life story – it wasn't a fleeting experience with one person. Do you think about that when designing new assassins?
No.

Why not?
The most interesting thing about Assassin's Creed for us is to explore history, not characters. When we decide what's next, the main question is, "what the next period is we want to visit?" That leads everything. When you jump 100 years or 1,200 years, it's hard to have the same character. Maybe in DLC we can go further. I agree though, when you saw the old Ezio in Revelations, it was very powerful. But the context and time are the most important priorities.

With Bayek and Aya's stories, you left an opening to return. The ending was much less resolute than other AC games.
I don't want to discuss it, but there is a plan. When we create characters as strong as Ezio, it's a pity not to go further. But then Bayek and his wife are powerful characters. Maybe something else will push forward, be it a TV show or a movie.

You told French newspaper *Le Monde* you want Ubisoft to move away from cutscenes. Do you feel with a game like Odyssey, where you are introducing more choice into the narrative, that you are going that direction? Are you where you want to be?
It's going in a good direction. It's not what you ask the team to do, it's how you ask them to do it, and the transition is very slow. Movies, television, books are not the same as games. In the movie you are a spectator. In games, you should be always an actor. If you want to be a spectator, it should still be a player decision. The games shouldn't decide for you. We need to give this kind of freedom to the player. Fewer cutscenes is a good direction, but what will be the best will be when the player won't be in front of a cinematic if they don't want to be. We discuss this approach every time. Cinematics are not good when they are forced. What I say to the narrative people is "Be so good that the player will want to go meet the characters. Attract the players, don't force them."

What most excites you about interactive entertainment right now?

There are so many things to be excited about; it's a marvelous industry. Everything changes very quickly. VR was buzzing last year and it's still my favorite technology. One day it will be the most important thing. It's not there yet. But China is here. And free-to-play games, like Fortnite, are a part of a newly exciting space. We have new spaces everywhere. Our business is full of possibilities.

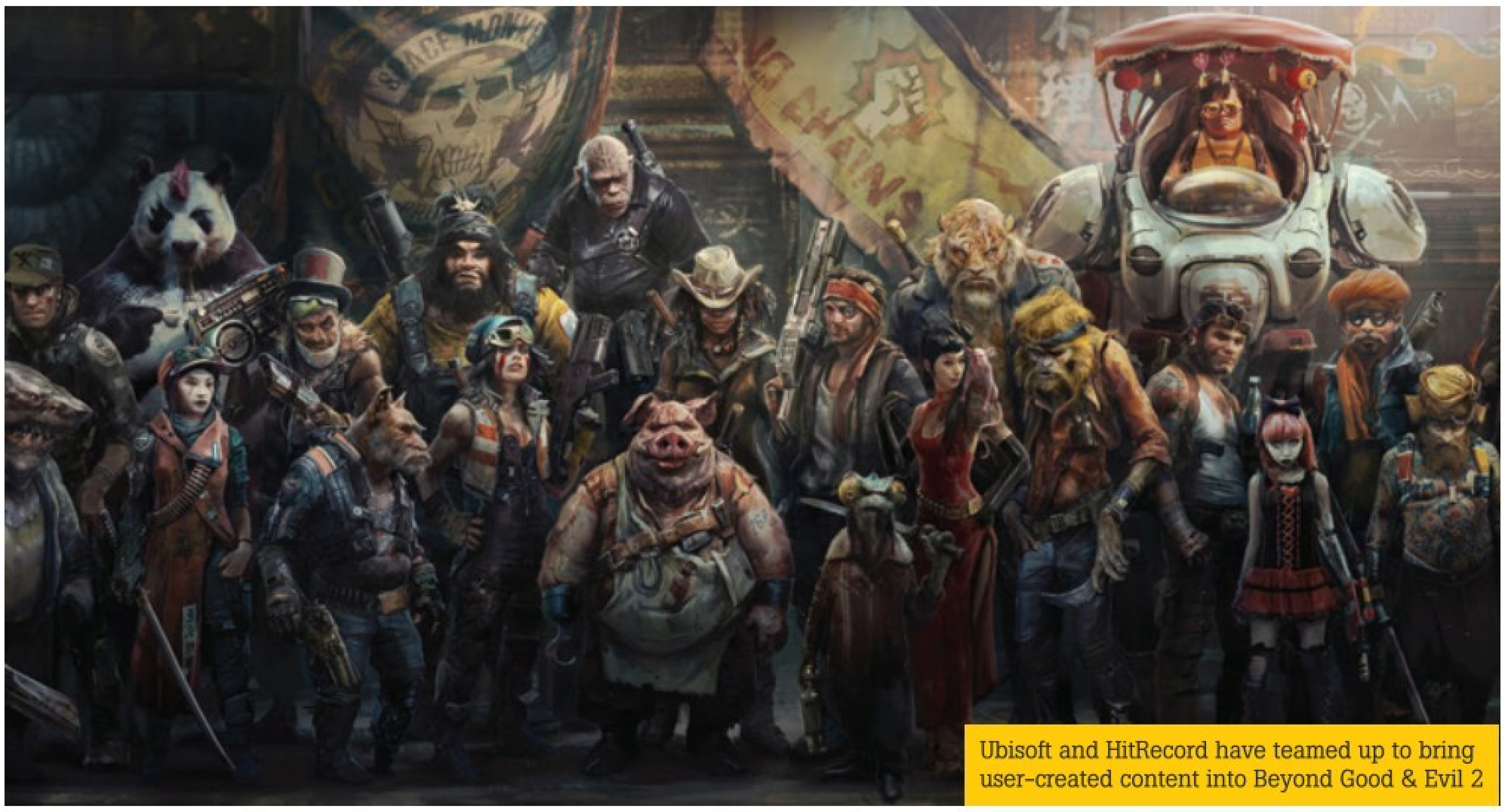
You know what is missing in this industry? A soul. Video games are about gaming, and gaming is not about entertainment, it's about learning. When you learn, you have fun. But when we are just entertainment we are losing something. I question the team about what real benefits the player will take away from the game for their real life. Right now, we don't do enough in this area. This is what excites me, how to make something that lets you have the most fun while also having something beneficial for your life.

Do you think interactive entertainment needs to move away from the primary verb being "kill"?
Yes. Some board games and card games have higher benefits than video games because when you play the board game you are analyzing people's faces. Do I want to cooperate? Do I want to believe in you when you are in character? This knowledge – gained while you are having fun – is very beneficial for your life because it will improve the way you read people's faces. We have to understand how we can change games and the rules to have this kind of benefit.

Looking back at this console generation, we have a lot of mature games with mature themes. Far fewer games targeting younger audiences have come from major publishers. All the kids are playing Minecraft and Roblox, experiential worlds where they can build and craft things, but I don't get a sense that servicing these players is high on the to-do list for major publishers. Why is that?
It's not our will not to go there. We have some games designed for younger audiences, but when we do Rayman or games like that, we don't sell as much as Assassin's Creed. The team wants to be successful and sell millions, and we have more success with the more adult-rated titles. Still, we have brands like Child of Light, Rayman, Rabbids, and Mario + Rabbids, so we have plenty of them. Starlink. Just Dance. But people know Ubi from Assassin's Creed, Rainbow Six. So I won't say we won't make more games for younger audiences. As I said it's an organic process to decide during the internal vetting process, but people generally propose more mature themes.

When both Beyond Good & Evil 2 and Wild were announced, Michel Ancel said he planned to split his time evenly, but making games is really hard and it takes a lot of attention to detail. I know he's more of a creative figure who specializes in conceptualization, but is he still splitting his time between the projects?
Yes, he does.

Partnering with HitRecord for user-generated content to be used as in-game assets is an interesting direction to go for Beyond Good & Evil 2. If it's successful is that an approach you want to apply to your other brands as well?
I love it. What I ask the team generally is, if you want to do a game in Bolivia, Montana, New York, or whatever the place, it's a win-win situation to ask the artists from that location to bring their talent to the game. It's not that easy to do. We have the will, but it doesn't happen very often. So maybe this is the best way to do it. For instance, when we did Montana in Far Cry 5, I wanted the artists from Montana to have their art inside the game to flesh out the towns and to have local music. You have a band somewhere on an old farm and the band is from Montana – this is what I would love to get to, so we have the most believable worlds. But that move to local integration happens very slowly, so maybe this collaboration will enable it and be a good example. We'll see if it works, but we believe in it.


Ubisoft and HitRecord have teamed up to bring user-created content into Beyond Good & Evil 2

Speaking of things moving slowly, let's talk about virtual reality. How far off are we to the point where you feel consumer interest will be stronger?
That's a good question. I don't know. There is something wrong at the moment, I don't know if it's the price, I don't know if it's the social component, I don't know what it is. What I know is in 10 years AR and VR will blow your mind. Maybe it's not video games, maybe it's something else that will make it mainstream. Like your phone now, it's indispensable. You can't live without it. We're not there yet with AR or VR. It's big, it's expensive, it's a non-social interface, but when you experience it, its potential is obvious.

One thing Ubisoft does well is build immersive worlds. I love the Discovery Tour, which seemed like a natural spin-off for the Assassin's Creed series. Doing that in VR though, when you're standing in the world, it's much harder to convince someone it's a real place and not just a playground.
You are right, this is what I want to do. The thing is, our engines are not ready for that yet. As soon as we do it, and we have some R&D on it, yes, we will be able to do many different things with the worlds we create. I think it's kind of a wasted opportunity to create a game world like we did with Egypt in AC Origins and use it only for games. We already have education, entertainment, story narrative in our game world. But when you are in VR, you feel the scale. It changes everything. I have some prototypes of Assassin's Creed in VR, but progress is very slow.

Locomotion is still the main inhibitor to first-person experiences in VR. Do you feel like you are making progress in that or are you still banging your head against the wall?
We accepted that the solution is teleportation. In my real life I would love to teleport – I look over there and then I am there. It would be a dream for us in real life, wouldn't it? So, it's okay to teleport.

Historically, you've tended to work with other development studios like Crytek with Far Cry and Techland with Call of Juarez. Do you still take pitches from studios outside of Ubisoft or is your focus on the

internal studios?
The focus is on internal development. We don't say no, but we aren't looking for external development partners especially hard right now. We are open to smaller opportunities if there's a win-win scenario with a small team and we believe in it. This is what we are looking for: a small team doing something with a small scope but with the highest production quality. Also, we are looking for partners on more arena sports games, like Rainbow Six. We are not looking for partners to develop big worlds or big new brands, because it's hard.

Some Ubisoft brands have fallen dormant in the last 5-10 years. Do you have a roadmap for any of that stuff you want to share with fans so they know yes, you hear their calls?
I love Splinter Cell. I love Prince of Persia. I can't disclose any information at this time, but I can say we are fighting for resources. It's not a question of will, it's a question of means.

Do you feel there are any genres or platforms Ubisoft isn't well represented in that you'd like to get into?
We don't do as well in mobile because competitors are better than us. Now, our competitors are talking about battle royale, but we think there are 15 different companies making those games, and like mobile, only two will be successful. Many will be killed along the way; I don't know which ones will survive. I am working with my team on what's next. It's important to understand why games like Fortnite are so successful, but it's not so we can copy it. It's to do something else, but with the same disruptive approach. So, we have plenty of ideas. We are testing a lot of ideas internally, and maybe only one will go to market.

How do you feel about your technology base right now? What are the immediate future things you need to do to evolve the way you need to evolve?
We have many technologies, so it's case by case, but Assassin's Creed has no multiplayer mode, and that is very important for the social aspect of gaming, so we are looking for that. Also, when you want to change something in the world in our games, right now the player has to download 20GB.

You want to create a more agile tech platform?
Yes, I want our game to become a place where there are many changes and new events. Even in Assassin's Creed. We have to change our games' agility. We have to consider mobile crossovers. There are millions of changes I would make. For example, the number of players. Today, our online technology could support 100 players, but at what cost? If we remove the crowd and stuff like that in Assassin's Creed we could make online easier ... it's a case by case basis. If a project needs 100 players at the same time then we can do it, but we need to find the added value.

We are also lacking on quality of service in some areas but we are improving this a lot with Rainbow Six Siege and now For Honor. The Division and Ghost Recon are also great for services. But we need some more agility with our services because one of our goals is for our games to become – I don't like the word – a platform. We need to provide new services and new content to the players, and then they will come back and see something new and compelling in the worlds. This type of technology is not yet ready for us.

Returning to the series is a matter of resources, not will

Traditionally, when you ship a game a lot of the team moves off the project. But with the frequency of updates with a live service game like Fortnite, that team is going full bore 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There isn't that moment to catch your breath after the game comes out. In a culture where burnout is already a real possibility for everyone because we're talking about passionate creators who want to spend more time making their games, how do you keep that quality of life in balance if live services is the future?
You're right. With Rainbow Six and The Division post-launch, the teams were so tired. They were very exhausted because the online tech was not good enough. That is why we decided to do Operation Health, it was the sanity patch both for the players and for the team. It was how to improve the game to spend less time to maintain it. So, it's a new topic for us and we work hard to improve the teams' lives. We don't want game as a service to become game as a slave for the teams.

I've met a lot of Ubisoft employees over my 20 years covering games, and there is a lot of talent in your buildings. But compared to other publishers, there seems to be a higher turnover rate with creative directors. A lot of senior level people like Patrice Desilets, Alex Hutchinson, Clint Hocking, and Dean Evans end up taking their talents elsewhere.
Yes, but Clint came back. Our turnover rate with creative directors isn't that high, but each time it's painful for us. It's part of life. It's a very hard job, with a lot of pressure coming from everywhere – internal, external, the players. We support them as much as possible.

Going back to one of your earlier points, do you think you would have retained more of that talent if you had more of the means to get more projects off the ground?
It's case by case. I know it's not always because of Ubisoft. It could be because of the special context of that particular point of their life. They want to move somewhere else or they don't feel the passion anymore or they want to express themselves differently. For Patrice, he wanted to do something else outside of Ubisoft and he wanted more freedom. It was okay. I think Ubisoft offers creative directors a lot of freedom, but we have deadlines too. We have the framework of open world, more systemic than narrative. Sometimes when someone wants to do a more narrative-driven game, then it's not as easy for them at Ubisoft. We offer a a lot of freedom and opportunities, but within a framework. Sometimes it can be a philosophical issue, but it's case by case. With Dean, I won't explain all the reasons he left, but if you want the messages they sent me before they left, I can show you. They loved Ubisoft.

We have 45 creative directors in the studio, you can ask them. They are more than happy. Even if it's hard.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1988
Serge Hascoet joins Ubisoft to evaluate and comment on each game the company makes

1995
Hascoet works as game director on Michel Ancel's Rayman, one of Ubisoft's first big hits

2000
Named chief creative officer, Hascoet aids in the acquisition of Red Storm Entertainment, the creators of Rainbow Six. Ubisoft transitions a sci-fi project called Drift into a Clancy-themed espionage game, creating the groundwork for the 2002 breakout hit Splinter Cell

2001
Hascoet convinces Jordan Mechner to collaborate with Ubisoft Montreal on a new Prince of Persia. In 2003, Ubisoft releases Sands of Time, returning the series to prominence

2004
Rather than making another Prince of Persia sequel with its next-generation third-person action engine, Hascoet allows Ubisoft Montreal to make a new IP. Assassin's Creed goes on to become a billion-dollar franchise

2012
Hascoet makes the tough call to cancel Rainbow Six Patriots and redouble efforts to make a competitive tactical shooter. Rainbow Six Siege launches in 2015, and after a slow start it goes on to attract more than 35 million players

2016
Under Hascoet's leadership, Ubisoft and Massive successfully launch the shared-world shooter The Division

2017
Hascoet's editorial team and Ubisoft Paris partner for another successful franchise reboot with Ghost Recon Wildlands

Game Informer's

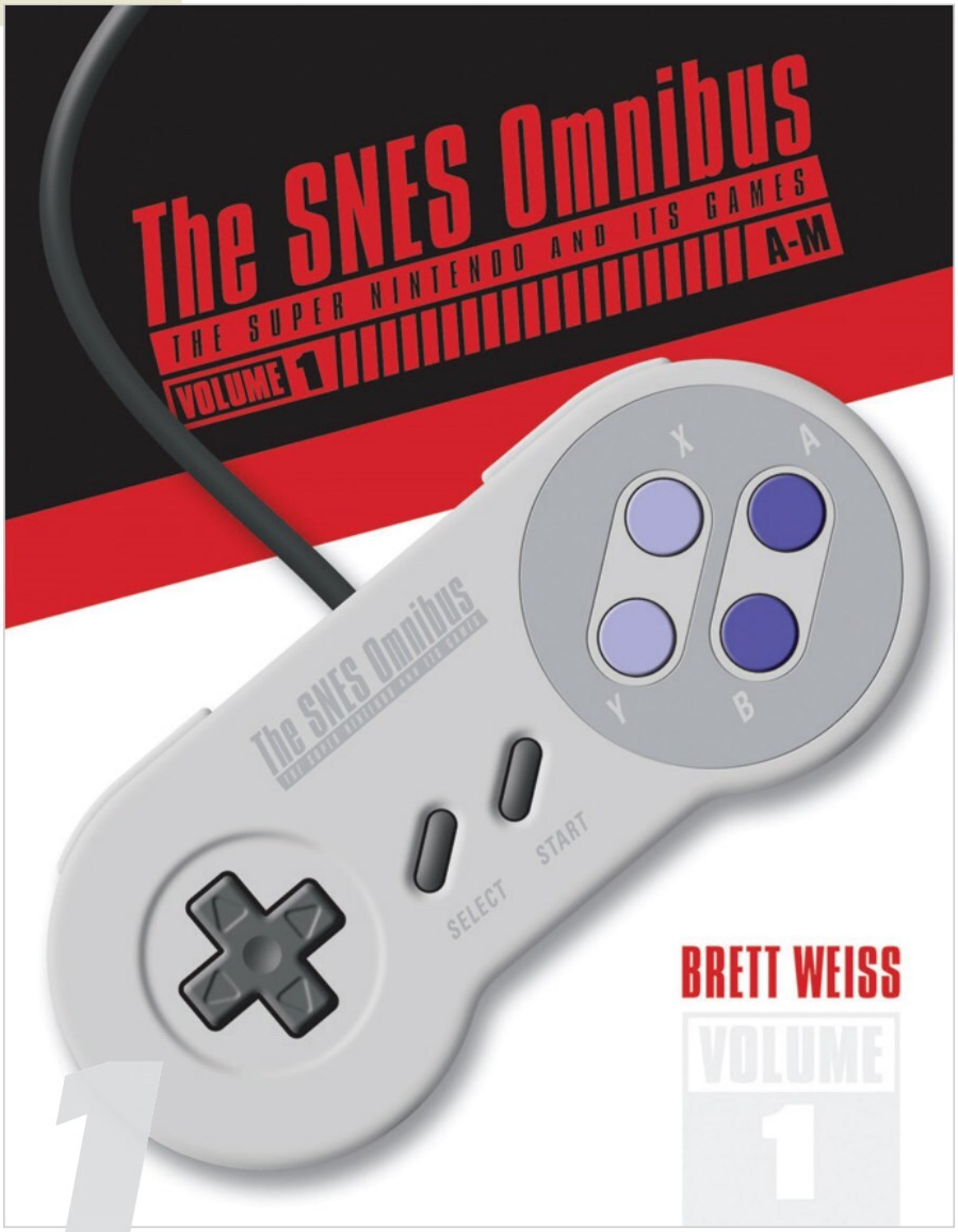
Fall

Reading List

Take a break from the controller and curl up with any one of these great books

by Ben Reeves

1


The SNES Omnibus
THE SUPER NINTENDO AND ITS GAMES
A-M
VOLUME 1
X
A
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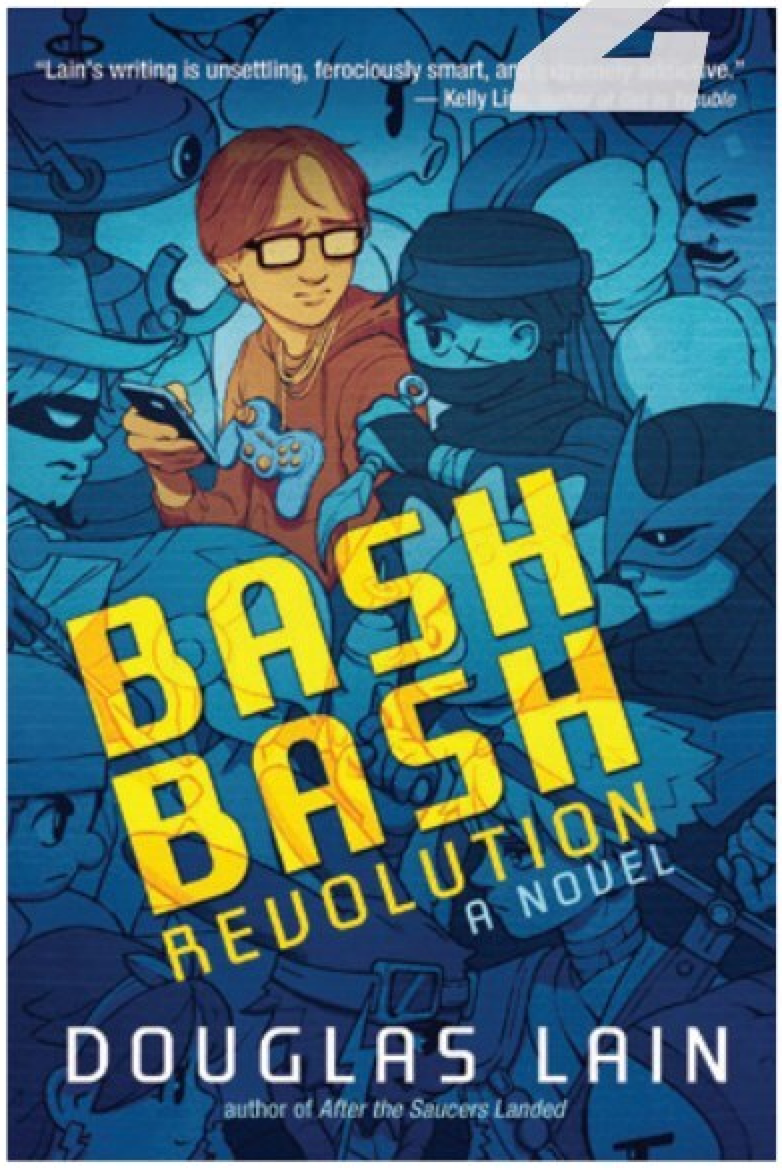
B
SELECT
START
BRETT WEISS
VOLUME
1

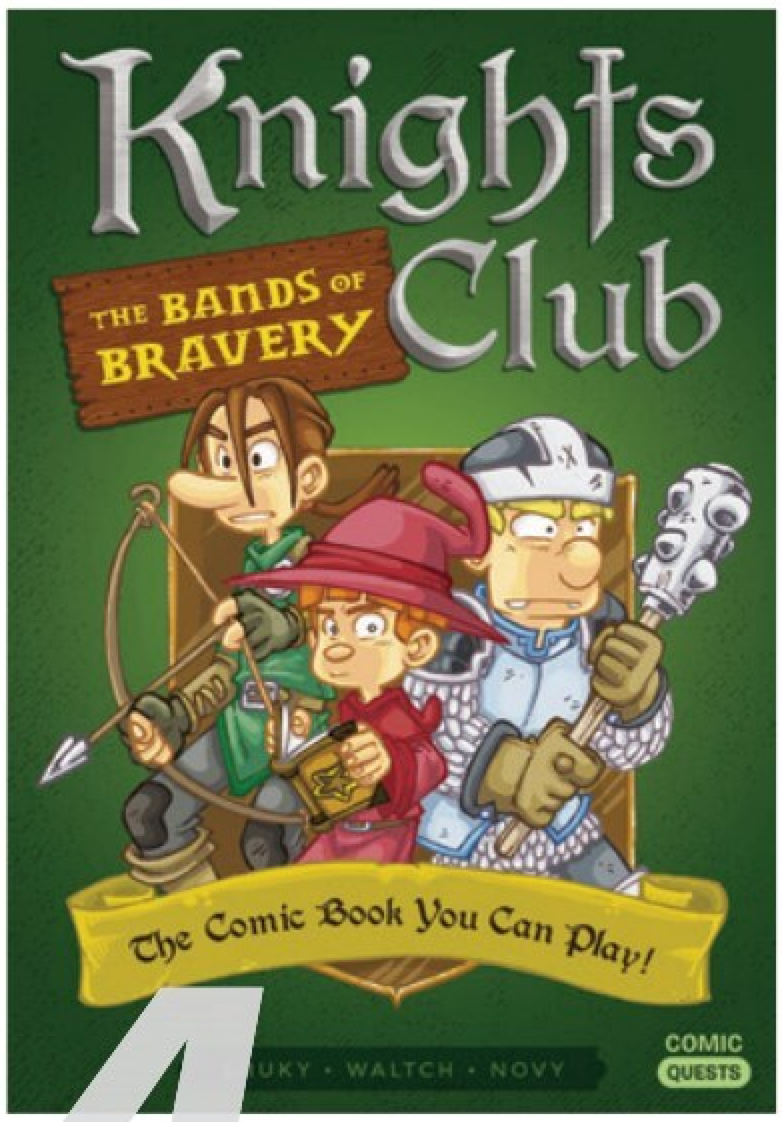
2


BASH BASH REVOLUTION
A NOVEL
DOUGLAS LAIN
author of After the Saucers Landed

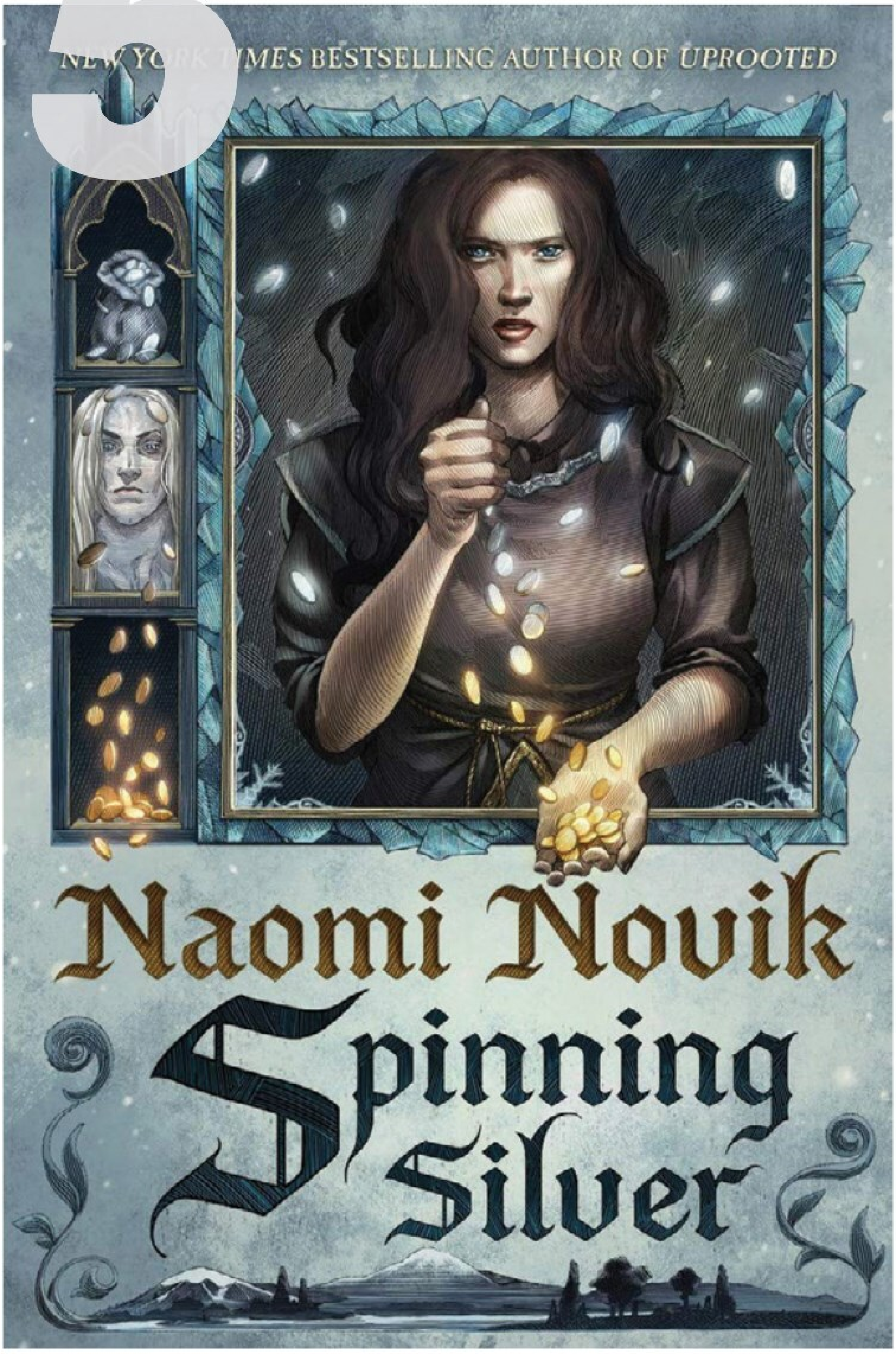
3

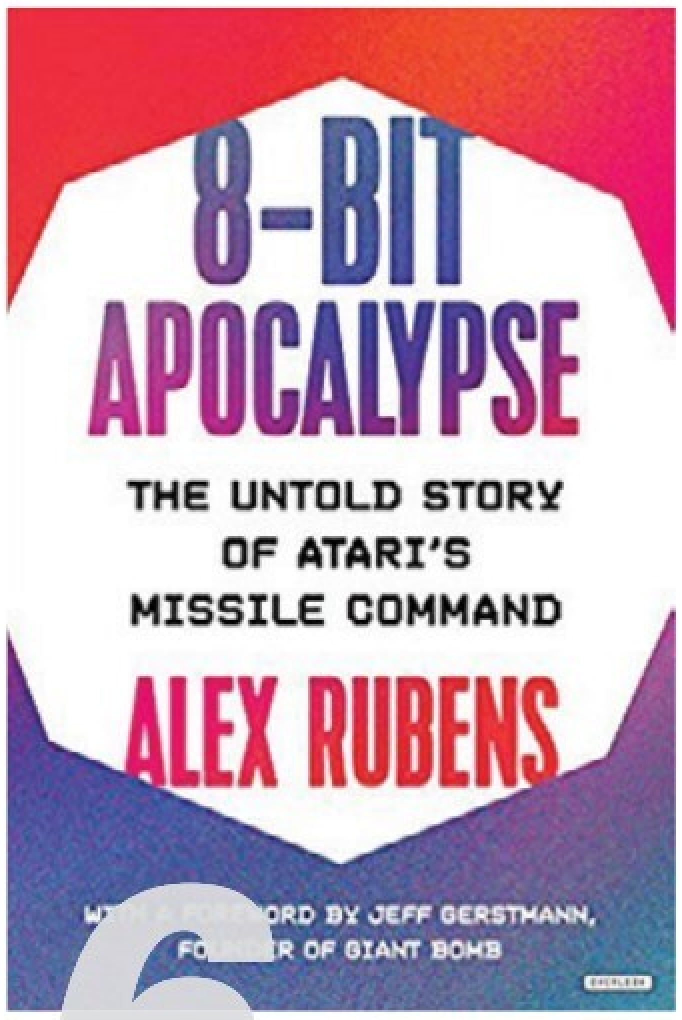
LEXCALIBUR

4


Knights Club
THE BANDS OF BRAVERY
The Comic Book You Can Play!
COMIC QUESTS

5





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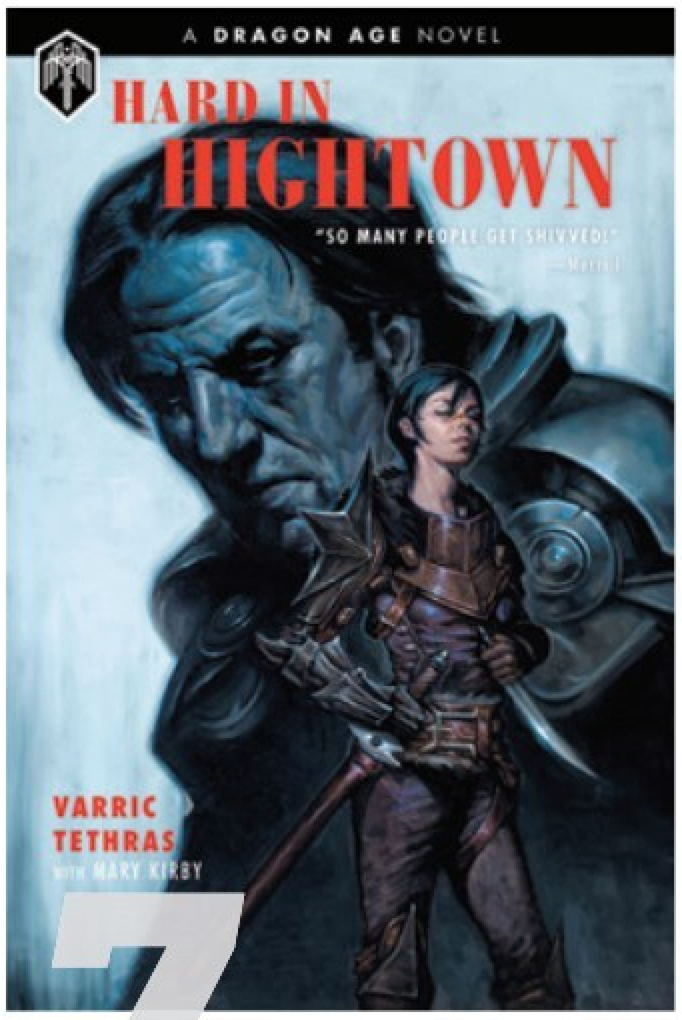


7

1 *The SNES Omnibus: The Super Nintendo And Its Games, Vol.1 (A–M)*
by Brett Weiss

The Super Nintendo featured some of the best games of all time. Historian and journalist Brett Weiss aims to chronicle every SNES game released in the U.S. with more than 2,000 full-color images, detailed reviews, development backgrounds, and nostalgic stories from industry insiders. This project was so massive it was split into two books.

$49.99 | brettweisswords.com

2 *Bash Bash Revolution*
by Douglas Lain

High school dropout Matthew Munson is obsessed with the outdated video game Bash Bash Revolution. One day, after an eight-year absence, Munson's estranged father reenters his life and sets him on a course of profound self-discovery. This coming-of-age novel from Philip K. Dick Award-nominated author Douglas Lain is told as a series of social media posts.

$14.99 | nightshadebooks.com

3 *Lexcalibur*
by Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik

In the spirit of Shel Silverstein, this collection of nerdy poems from the creators of the webseries Penny Arcade sends readers on a journey where they encounter treasure chests with sharp teeth, haunted swords, and adorable were-kitties.

$15.00 | **store.penny-arcade.com**

4 *Knights Club: The Bands of Bravery*
by Novy, Shuky, Waltch

The year is 1012, and you are one of three brothers who dreams of joining the fearless Knights of the Royal Order. This sets you on a journey through snowy mountains, mysterious lakes, and haunted forests. In this innovative middle-grade graphic novel, readers choose their own path through a series of riddles and hidden passages as they craft an adventure that's unique to them.

$9.99 | quirkbooks.com

5 *Spinning Silver: A Novel*
by Naomi Novik

Miryem is the daughter of moneylenders, but her father can't collect his debts, so she is forced to provide for her family by any means necessary. When word about her efforts quickly travels across the country, Miryem is soon confronted with an impossible challenge by a nameless king. This retelling of Rumpelstiltskin comes from the bestselling author of the Nebula Award-winning Uprooted.

$28.00 | penguinrandomhouse.com

6 *8-Bit Apocalypse* by Alex Rubens

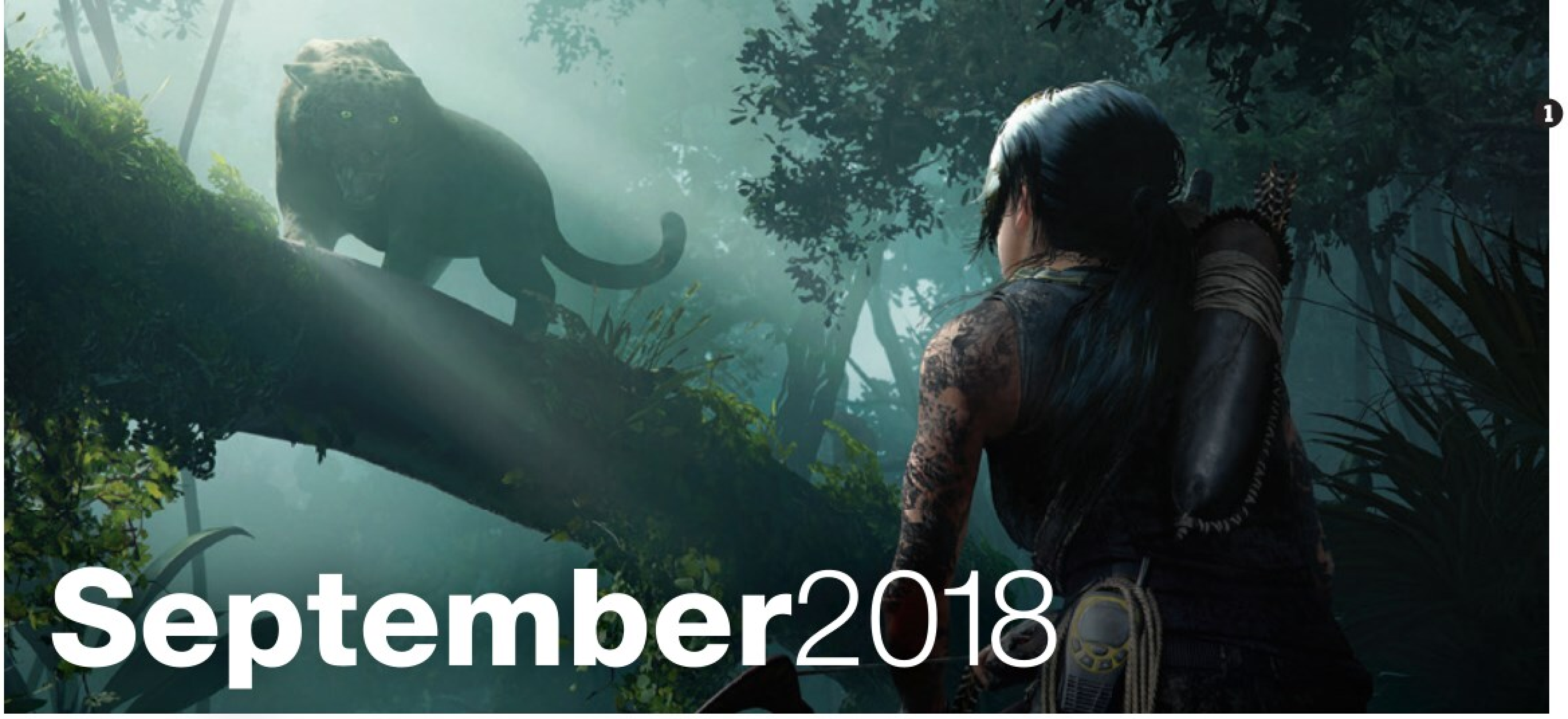
Missile Command was one of the earliest arcade games, but it was also a savvy cultural commentary. Players were asked to put their fingers over the launch button in a no-win scenario that paralleled the political climate of the era. Tech journalist Alex Rubens dives into the history of Atari's Missile Command and the torturous development that gave its programmer nightmares.

$26.95 | overlookpress.com

7 *Dragon Age: Hard in Hightown*
by Varric Tethras and Mary Kirby

When a weathered guardsman and his rookie partner discover a dead magistrate during a routine patrol, they're soon caught in the crossfire between the religious Chantry and a shadowy organization called the Executors. This "debut" crime-noir novel is written by Dwarven rogue and Dragon Age party member Varric Tethras. ◆

$19.99 | penguinrandomhouse.com



September2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 04
- Destiny 2: Forsaken (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age (PS4, PC)

Friday 07
- Immortal: Unchained (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- NBA 2K19 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- NBA Live 19 (PS4, Xbox One)
- SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy (PS4, Switch)
- Spider-Man (PS4)

Friday 14
- NHL 19 (PS4, Xbox One)
- Shadow of the Tomb Raider (PS4, Xbox One, PC) ①

Friday 21
- Spyro Reignited Trilogy (PS4, Xbox One)
- Xenoblade Chronicles 2: Torna the Golden Country (Switch)

Tuesday 25
- Valkyria Chronicles 4 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Thursday 27
- Life is Strange 2: Episode 1 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Friday 28
- Dragon Ball FighterZ (Switch)
- FIFA 19 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PS3, 360, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Thursday 06
- Sunday Night Football (NBC)

Sunday 09
- Kidding (Showtime)

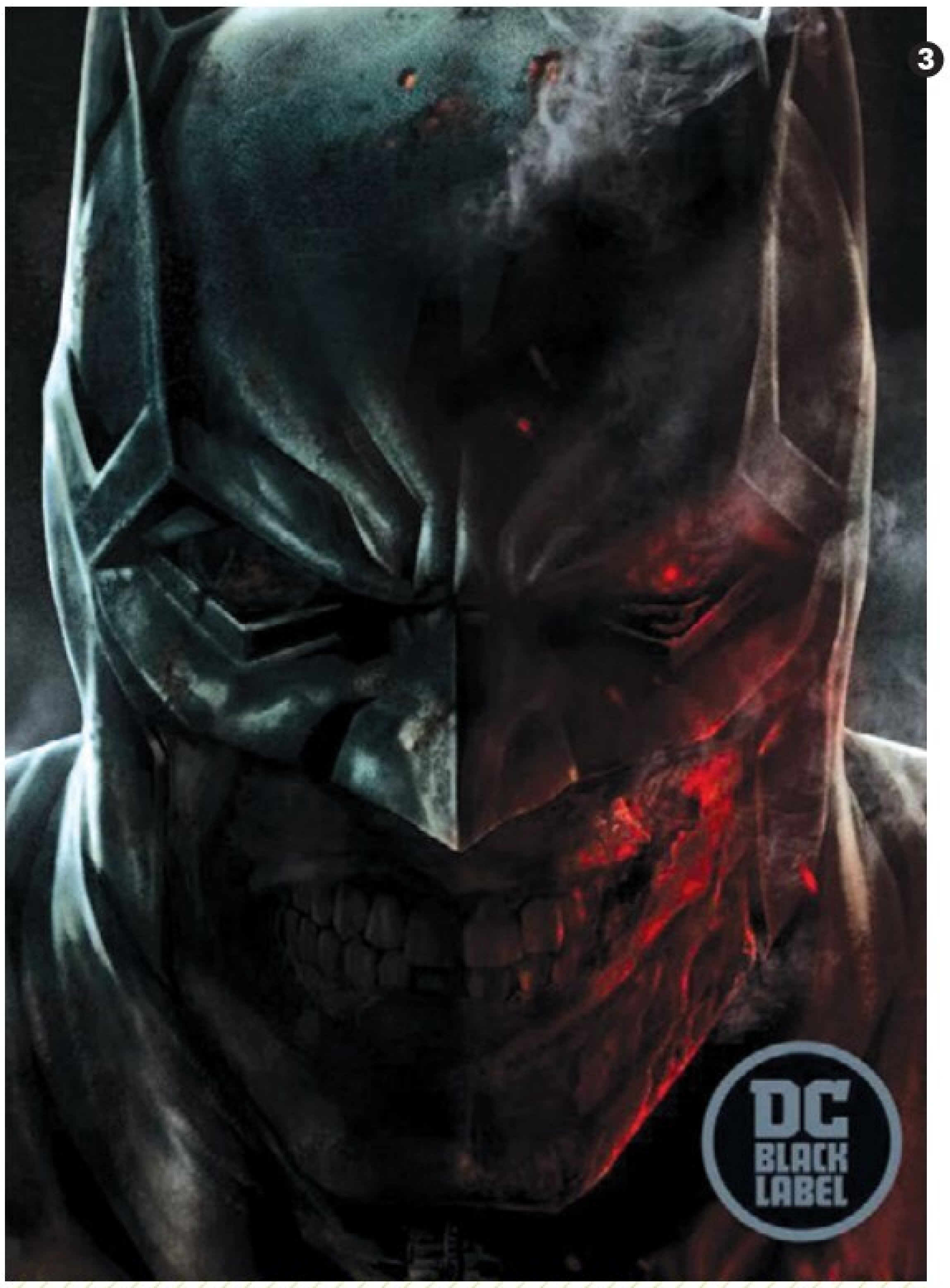
Friday 14
- Alpha (theaters)
- The Predator (theaters) ②

Monday 17
- 70th Primetime Emmy Awards (NBC)

Friday 21
- The House with a Clock in its Walls (theaters)
- Robin Hood (theaters)

Monday 24
- Manifest (NBC)

Friday 28
- Night School (theaters)
- Smallfoot (theaters)



GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 19
DC Black Label ③

A new imprint from DC Comics called the Black Label, gives comic creators complete freedom to tell stories outside of the main continuity. The Black Label kicks off today with Batman: Damned, a bi-monthly series from writer Brian Azzarello that that begins with the death of the Joker.

Wednesday 26
Oculus Connect 5

The drive to transform virtual reality into the next great frontier of interactive entertainment and more continues at this year's Oculus Connect, a two-day expo that shows the latest breakthroughs for the medium. Held in San Jose's McEnergy Convention Center, we anticipate game announcements and potentially news for upgraded hardware.

Saturday 29
Minecon Earth

This year's Minecraft celebration unfolds in a 90-minute livestream that features new game information, a cosplay competition, and community panels. Last year's live stream was co-hosted by Will Arnett and featured a musical performance by Supergirl's Melissa Benoist. Who will be at this year's con? Tune in to find out. ◆

TOYOTA

Wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Hands on the wheel. Foot on the pedal. Skin tingling. Hair flying. Heart thumping. Nerves jumping. Eyes wide. Pulse quick. It's a whole-body experience in C-HR and 86. ***Let's Go Places.***

Prototypes shown with options. ©2018 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

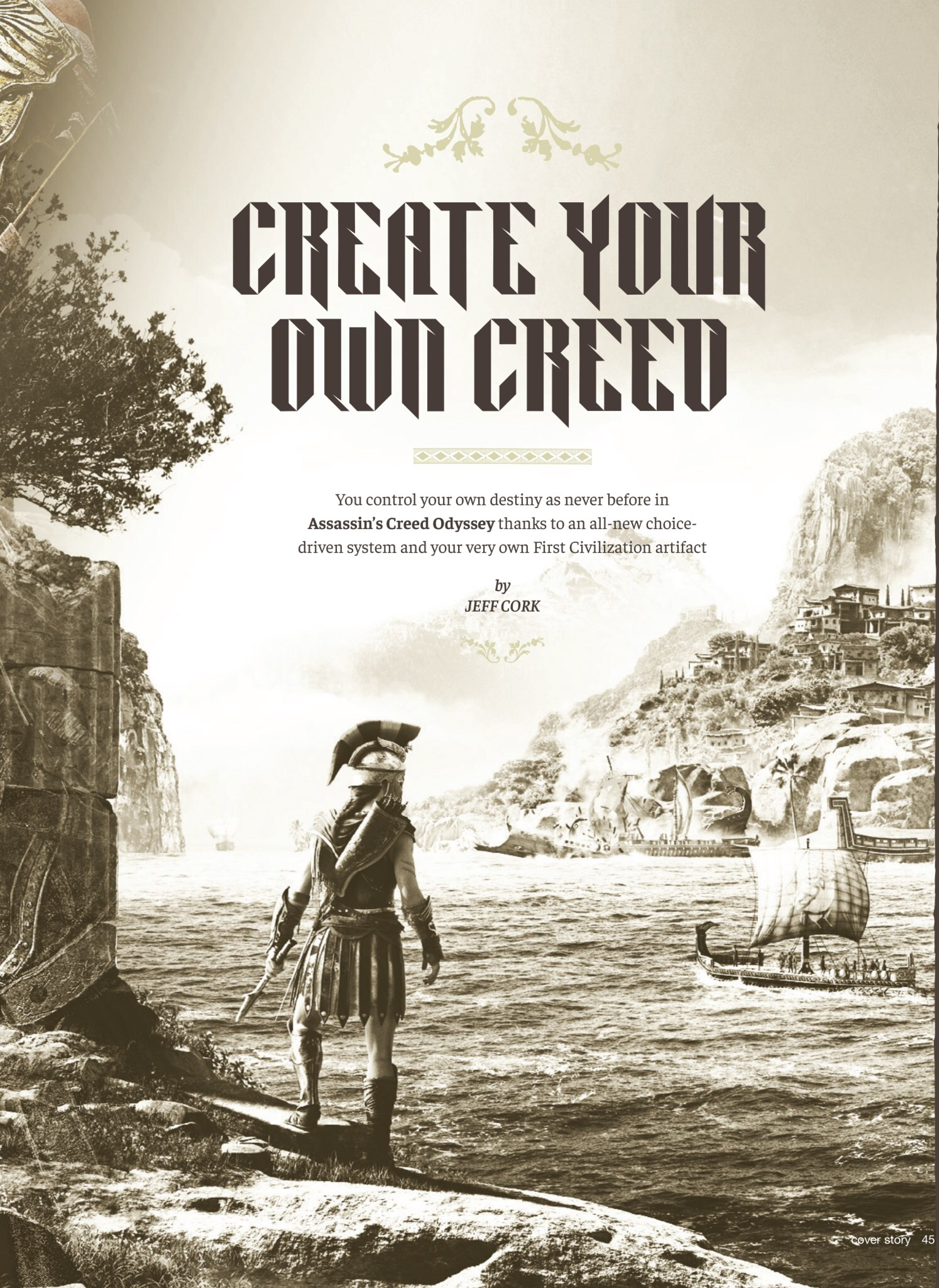
» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

» DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Quebec

» RELEASE
October 5



CREATE YOUR OWN CREED

You control your own destiny as never before in **Assassin's Creed Odyssey** thanks to an all-new choice-driven system and your very own First Civilization artifact

by
JEFF CORK

Choice has always existed in Assassin's Creed. Will you stick to the shadows, or brazenly take out your target face to face? Will you infiltrate an enemy encampment using your wits or rely on sharpened steel? The results may have been satisfying, but let's face it: Those choices were moment-to-moment actions, sandwiched between cutscenes. Ubisoft Quebec plans to change that in a few short months with its ambitious, RPG-focused take on the series.

Ubisoft relaunched one of the biggest names in gaming with Assassin's Creed Origins. It was a bold reimagining for a series that, thanks to quality-control issues and an unrelenting release schedule, was in dire need of a fresh start. The shift toward a sprawling open world, collectable loot, and twitch-based combat was a significant change, but the publisher was cagey about what it meant for the series. Was it a one-off experiment, or did it mark a new direction moving forward? Nearly one year later, the answer is coming into focus.

With Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Ubisoft Quebec takes the foundation that Ubisoft Montreal laid with Origins and builds its own ambitious world atop it. Simultaneously, the studio is making something uniquely its own. Ancient Greece is the backdrop for an epic new adventure that shows the rippling effects of choice, from how you interact with NPCs, how you approach missions, and what you do with the rewards.

"Origins was the first step in doing the step into RPG, and it was mostly on a bigger world, player progression, levels, quests, a little more of that, but we wanted to go to the next step," says creative director Jonathan Dumont. "The next step is really taking what the word means in a role-playing game and giving you a role. … We really wanted to associate RPG with player choices. For us, that's how we envision RPG. Choice is at the core of every new game system we've developed."

Odyssey's take on ancient Greece is filled with beauty

Starting An Odyssey

Ubisoft Quebec started working on Odyssey shortly before development on its last game, Assassin's Creed Syndicate, wrapped up. Syndicate was the last "traditional" entry in the series, before Ubisoft Montreal flipped the script with Origins. Assassin's Creed Odyssey game director Scott Phillips was excited to see the new direction the series was heading and the opportunities it gave his team.

"When we started talking about dialogue and choices and RPG, I was hooked immediately," Phillips says. "After Syndicate, I felt personally that Assassin's Creed needed to go in a different direction, and that's why it was nice to talk to the Origins team and feel like they felt the same way. They were trying to go in the same direction that we were, and things just sort of worked out well for the two of us."

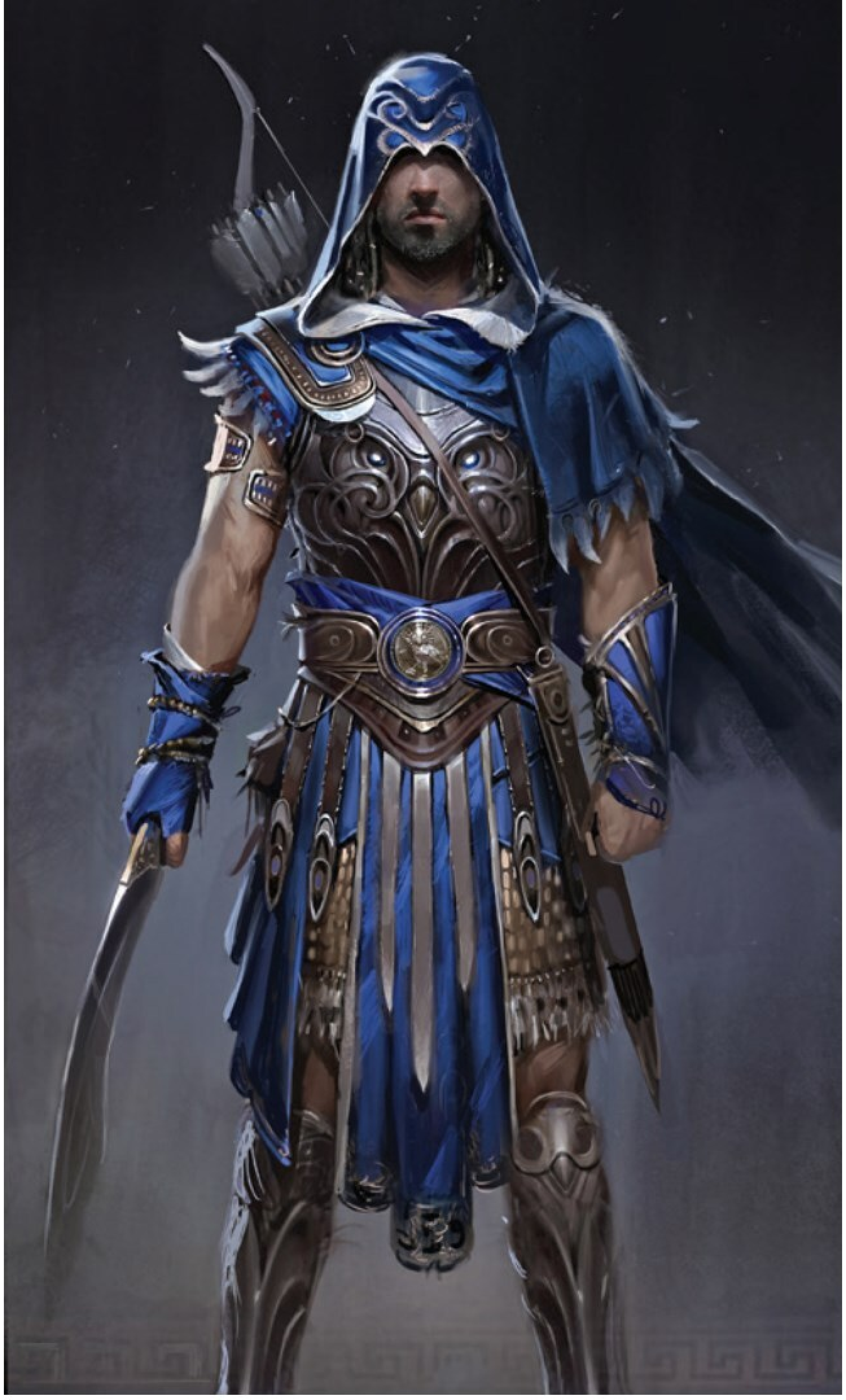
When it came time to choose a setting, the team arrived on a big one: ancient Greece, around 431 BC. Ubisoft says it's one of the most-requested periods and locations fans have asked for, which makes sense. It's an interesting era, when the Spartans and Athenians were embroiled in the Peloponnesian War. It's a time period in which people celebrated figures like Zeus, Athena, and Heracles. It's one of the most beautiful places on the planet. The fact that it's within shouting distance of *300*, a film that memorably highlighted the era's brutal combat, didn't hurt, either. The setting also supported a new kind of character for the series, who navigated the world free from any loyalties.

"For us, when we learned that mercenaries were involved in the Peloponnesian war, it seemed like a perfect way for us to also support Greece, too," says narrative director Melissa MacCoubrey. "It allows us to take a part in the war and a part in peoples' lives without putting you down on one track that you have to stick to, without allying you to one side or the other. To allow the most player choice as possible."

These choices start with who takes the starring role on this journey. You play as either Alexios or Kassandra, though the differences between them are almost purely cosmetic. Both heroes have the same missions, abilities, dialogue options, and even romance opportunities available to them. In short, you don't need to worry about missing out on anything by picking one over the other, aside from whatever each individual actor brings to the performance.

Regardless of which character you choose, you aren't inhabiting a cipher. The team has established a base personality for the hero, which allows players to play within those boundaries while also remaining a consistent presence in the world. "Both Kassandra and Alexios are short-tempered, emotional, passionate people," MacCoubrey says. They're also mercenaries, though it's up to you if you want to follow your heart as you proceed through the world or let cold, hard coin lead the way.

You were separated from your family as a child, and one of the main story threads is your journey to track them down. "You start out the game doing simple tasks for people in order to make money because you got kicked out of Sparta at an early age," Phillips says. "This is your way to survive, and you've been doing it ever since then. … You don't side with Spartans or Athenians. You don't necessarily agree with either one of them. You work with both of them."



Do No Harm (Unless You Want To)

Choice permeates much of the Odyssey experience, and we get to see some of that in action during a new mission. We're trying to locate a Spartan woman who may have crossed paths with the physician Hippokrates. This being a game, it's never quite as simple as it may seem.

We find our way to a clinic in Argolis, where Hippokrates should be, but he's not there. Instead, his assistant Sostratos is in the midst of an intense conversation with an angry woman. She's upset that Hippokrates is meddling with healing, rather than leaving it to the gods. We step in and choose an aggressive dialogue option. It settles the situation for now, but she warns that Hippokrates may face grave consequences if he continues with his impiety. "If the doctor can't think of a suitable offering, his head will do," she says as she leaves.

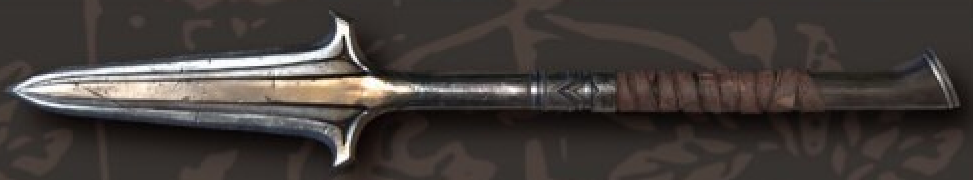
Sostratos informs us that Hippokrates left in such a hurry that he forgot to bring some of his equipment with him. We agree to make the delivery, for a price – we're mercenaries after all – though we could have offered to do it as a general courtesy. Before we leave for the Cave of Pan, Sostratos gives us a heads up: "You'll notice him by his bald spot… though I wouldn't mention it."

We travel to the cave and discover that Hippokrates is a popular man. A line of sick people winds down the path, each waiting for a moment of his time. Hippokrates is indeed easy to spot, even without a waypoint. He sports a shaggy wreath of hair, while the top of his head is completely bare. Hippokrates gladly retrieves his medical equipment from us, but he's too busy to focus on our Spartan woman. One of his patients is in particularly rough shape, and he needs some medical notes to properly care for the ill man.

We agree to help, but can't resist a particularly tantalizing option on the dialogue menu as a parting shot. "According to Sostratos, you don't like people mentioning your… you know." He seems confused, so we blurt it out. "Your hair, or lack of it." "Yes, yes, make your jokes," he mutters, obviously annoyed.

"This seems stupid, but he's never going to forget that in other quests after," Dumont says. "We try to make it something like, 'Oh, I just want to be a douche,' and you pay for it later. It doesn't mean that you can't be friends with him later, it just means that it'll always come back again in the discussion."

"The thing that I love about them is that even if there's a little bit of pain involved later, I think the choices are fun," MacCoubrey says. "With that one, it does add to the experience a little bit. If you're going to have fun and call him bald just to see what comes next, it may not be as easy for you. I mean if you want to be friends with somebody, you don't start with, 'You're bald.'"



THE SPEAR OF LEONIDAS

Tens of thousands of years before humanity scratched its way to power, Earth was inhabited by a mysterious race known as the First Civilization. At least, that's how it was in Assassin's Creed lore. These proto-people were technologically advanced, and they helped guide humankind behind the scenes. They wielded mysterious artifacts that held great power, such as the Apple of Eden from the early Assassin's Creed games. In Assassin's Creed Odyssey, your character has an artifact of their own: the Spear of Leonidas.

"In past Assassin's Creeds, when you get the Apple of Eden or those sorts of devices, usually it's at the end of the game, the last 10 minutes you go, 'Awesome, I can kill everybody who comes near me and blast lightning at everyone,'" says game director Scott Phillips. "But we wanted to do that throughout the entire game." You won't be able to hurl lightning like Zeus at the start, but it is the driving force behind your character's impressive abilities.

"It's something that you receive because you have the bloodline of Leonidas," Phillips says. "You are one of his descendants." You're able to make great use of it, too. There isn't a hidden blade in the game, so the Spear of Leonidas acts as your assassination tool. The team is taking advantage of the fact that it isn't tethered to your arm by allowing players to perform new ranged assassinations.

Phillips says the animation director came up with a needle and thread analogy for the weapon, and it's a brutally apt comparison. Alexios or Kassandra hurl the projectile at their targets, impaling them. Rather than yanking it out by the handle, the follow-up attacks typically involve manipulating victims so they can pull the spear all the way through their bodies – stomping on chests and snapping necks when necessary.

Players upgrade the spear as they play through the story – its level acts as a gating mechanism for overall skill progression – by visiting First Civilization shrines hidden across Greece and the surrounding seas. "[Y]ou as Alexios or Kassandra, you don't understand it, but it works," Phillips says. "It makes the spear even better, you get these abilities that are almost godlike, and that's why myths are written about you and why Herodotus writes about you – because you're doing things that are of the gods."

Dumont points out this is a fairly simple main-path quest that contains a variety of different options for the player to role play. We aren't able to see the repercussions for making light of our follicly challenged acquaintance, but we do get immediate feedback on some other choices. An attempt at bribing another physician to share info with Hippokrates fails when we don't have enough drachmae, so we do the next best thing: knock him out and flop him over our horse. Instead of that route, we could have helped that doctor with his own patient and have him follow us more willingly. Our approach technically works, though Hippokrates is disappointed that our rash decision led to the death of the other patient.

Before E3, we experienced just how intricately connected some of those choices can be. In a demo that lasted about five hours, we explored the islands of Delos and Mykonos and helped a group of rebels. After assassinating the cruel leader of the island, hope was restored and we left having made the world a slightly better place. That was just one possible outcome, however. Things could have ended much differently if we'd chosen to romance characters, let a seemingly unrelated NPC in a side mission live, or any other number of variables. Instead of a peaceful conclusion, that excursion could have ended in a duel, mass-poisoning incident, or with a character's suicide on our conscience.

"We wanted you to be able to look at those choices all the time and not know what the impact is going to be," Dumont says. "We have some quests where it looks like it's not important, but it could have importance later on down the road." There will certainly be consequences for your actions, but the narrative team has worked to ensure that choices and their outcomes aren't drawn from one extreme behavior or the other. "The story, there's not really a right or wrong way," Dumont says. "We didn't want to say, 'This is the way to play the game, this is the way to mess up the game.'"

From what we've seen and played, these choices add up, creating a much more compelling world to explore than we've seen in past AC games. Being able to choose your tone in conversations is refreshing, even in instances that don't have any far-reaching repercussions.

MacCoubrey shows us a clip from an interactive cutscene where Kassandra is talking to a woman named Drusilla about retrieving some stolen wood from bandits. As is often the case, Drusilla is insistent to the point of being grating. After telling Drusilla she'll take care of the problem, Kassandra doesn't exactly get a gracious response. "Make sure that you do. And be quick about it," Drusilla barks. Rather than shrug off the rudeness, the player in the clip chooses an aggressive response.

"Your moaning won't help get the job done any faster," Kassandra barks back. "I'll kill the bandits and get your f---ing wood back." Drusilla is taken aback by the response. "I…I…know you will. Take your time finding them. I trust you." It's a small touch, but it adds a nice catharsis to an otherwise frustrating interaction. The player could have taken the abuse, too, but it's entirely up to them.

"If you lie to someone, you're not necessarily going to have a negative consequence," MacCoubrey says. "And if you're friendly to someone, you're not necessarily going to have a positive consequence to that. It's very dictated by the context and the person. And sometimes there are no consequences at all." Well, no consequences aside from the satisfaction of finally telling an ungrateful NPC that enough is enough.

The game features dynamic weather, which highlights the sophisticated lighting

The World Is Yours

Assassin's Creed Odyssey features a 100-square-mile world, split about evenly between land and ocean. It's a time of battle and conquest, where the fate of any of the 28 city-states hangs in the balance. Players should be pleased to know that virtually all of it is available to players from the beginning, too.

"If you start the game and you say, 'I want to go over there,' You can," MacCoubrey says. "They're not blocked off. Somebody might kick your ass, but you're not prohibited from going there."

On a similar note, players won't easily outgrow the starting zones as they level up. There's a wealth of content in the game, and myriad side missions and diversions to pull players around the map.

"You never burn a zone, come back, and it's level 2 when you're level 20," Dumont says. "Let's say the first zone is level 5-10. I do a few quests, but the story is interesting me somewhere or I found out that I can kill these dudes and I just want to do that now. Typically when you left that zone and came back five levels after, now they die when I look at them. We didn't want that."

To solve that problem, the team borrowed a feature that was added to Origins post release: The world levels with you, to a point. Dumont says they wanted those initial areas to still have value and challenge for players, while still reflecting their efforts to become stronger and more powerful. "We have a system that will catch up, but never fully. It'll be about two or three levels under you when you come back. It's still a decent challenge, but it still shows your growth as well."

World director Ben Hall took us on a refreshingly peaceful tour of Athens, which showed off some of the attention to detail players can expect to see in Odyssey. "We tried to tap into the notion that the ancient Greeks believed that the landscape of Greece was built by the gods, so that's something we wanted to tap into and depict with everything we did, to make a world that is colorful, vibrant, and lively – especially coming off the back of Syndicate, which was London, which is gray and dull."

Hall says his team pushed back against the ordinary depictions of ancient Greece, which lean on in it being an arid place with an overemphasis on white and gold. "We wanted to make sure that we met the historical accuracy and hit the color that we wanted to hit by making sure that the buildings were colored the vibrant colors and the statues are not all marble – quite a lot of them are painted, which is represented in here, too."

Athens is an intricately crafted city, with a variety of different districts. Hall says it's about 30-percent larger than Origins' Alexandria, so we'll take any help we can get in this pre-GPS era. Players who take the time to absorb the sights will be rewarded for their efforts. If you linger in the marble district, you can watch as workers take marble slabs from the quarry and transform them into statues. Another area follows the creation of pottery, showing how terracotta is shaped, glazed, and fired into the iconic forms we see today in museums. Of course, you may only notice this stuff when you crash your way through the market stalls while being chased by the guards.

Ubisoft isn't saying whether Odyssey has a Discovery Tour mode that teaches players about what life was like in Greece back then, but we'd be surprised if it didn't. They've put a ton of work into recreating this world, and it would be a shame not to showcase it. Now that players won't outgrow areas, they'll have reasons to return – even if they're not entirely focused on education.

Play Your Way

Ubisoft Quebec recognizes that over the years, players have developed their own preferred ways of engaging with the action in Assassin's Creed. In Odyssey, the team continues to support the three main paths – assassins, hunters, and warriors – while renewing the effort to ensure that each one makes the player feel as powerful as possible.

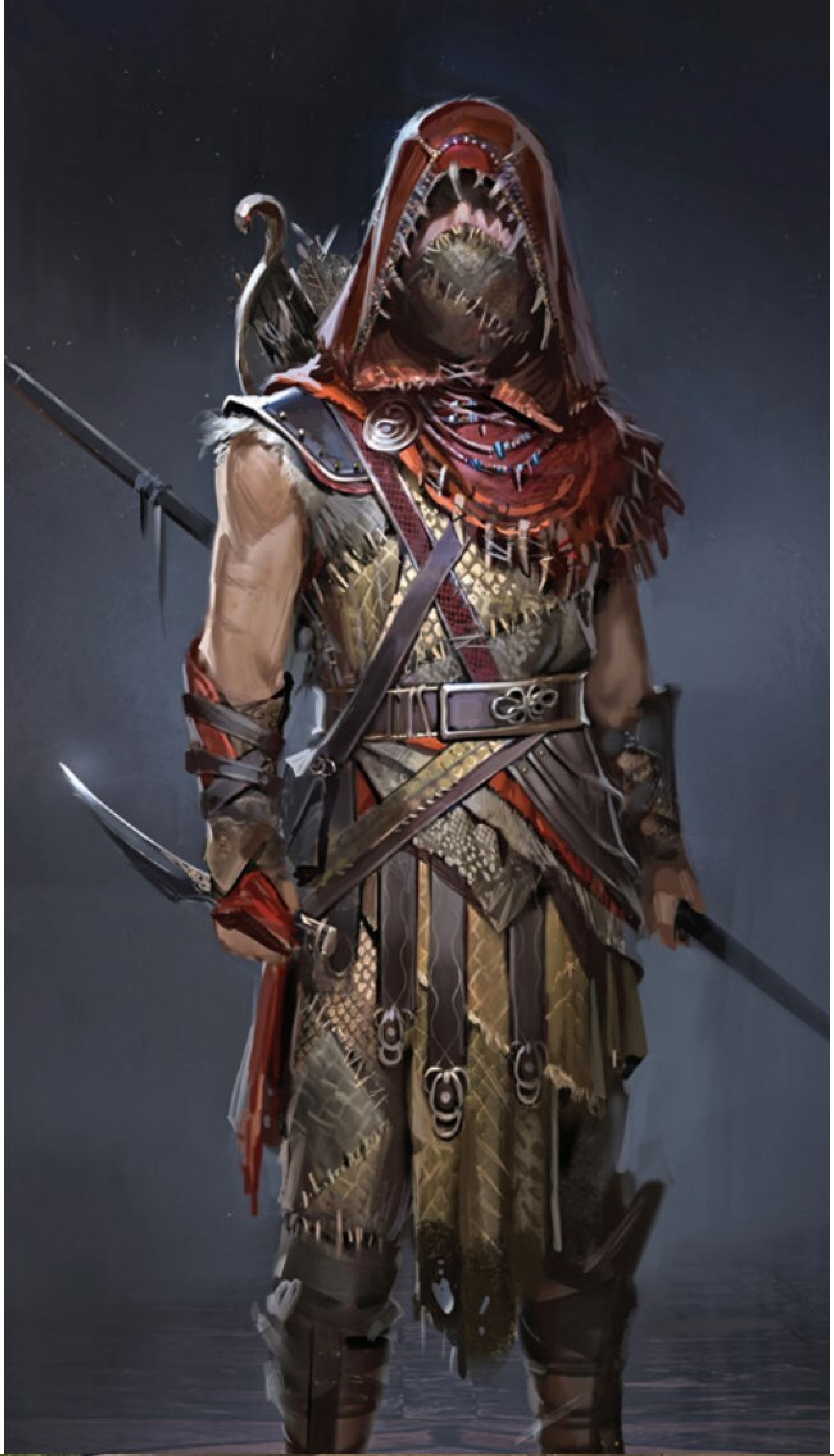
Assassin's Creed Origins may have marked a departure from previous entries, but the series has never been stagnant. Various teams have worked on it over the years, and different gameplay elements and systems have shifted in and out as well. Veteran players have dabbled in tower defense, team management, sailing, and more, with varying degrees of success. Along the way, players have determined for themselves what it meant to be an Assassin's Creed game, which is something the team at Ubisoft Quebec understands.

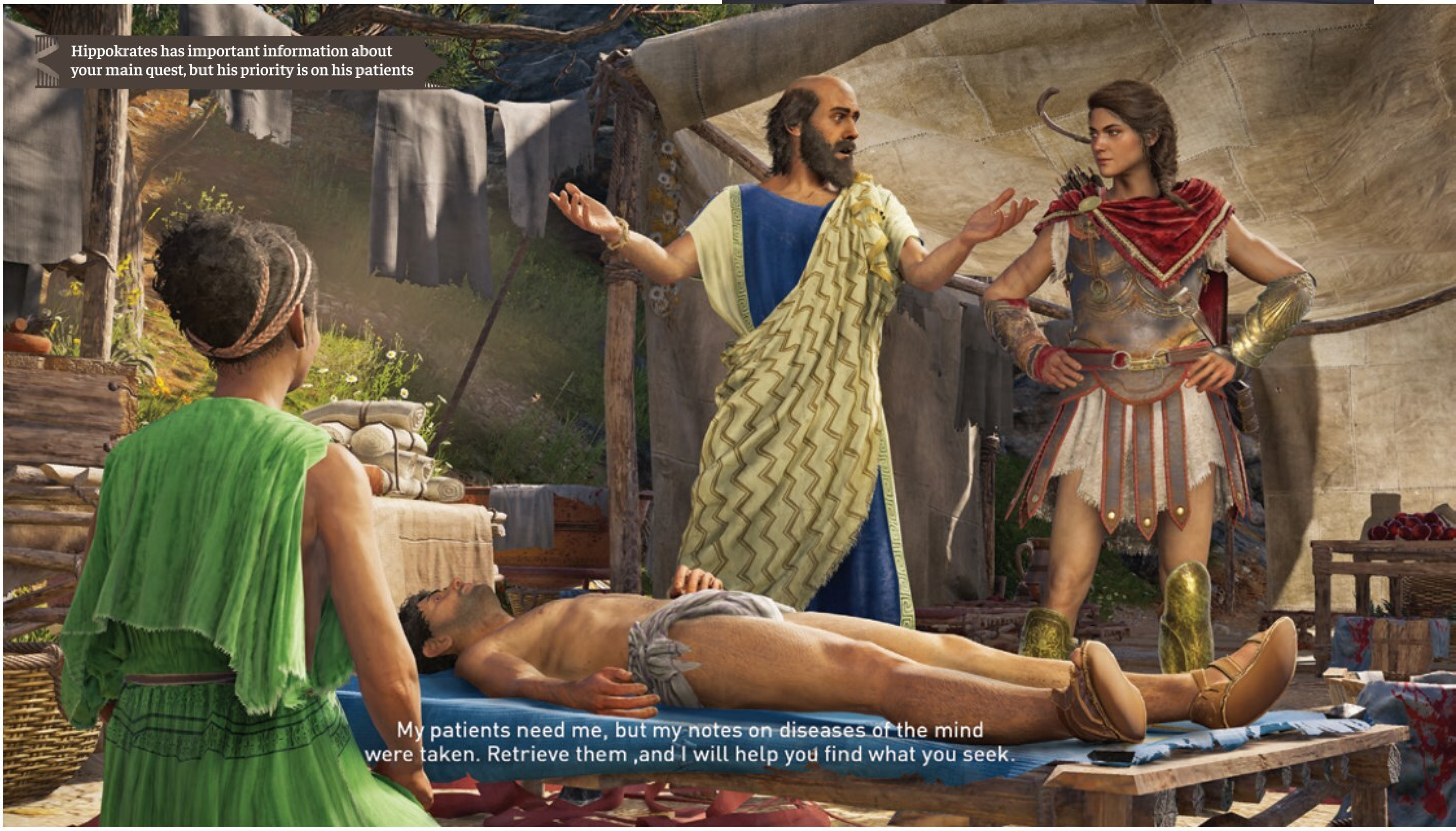
"Assassin's Creed is a brand that's been there for 10 years, and we all play it differently, so we all have different expectations for the brand," Dumont says. "People who are playing the game want to play it a certain way. We allow those play styles and we make them a viable option for you. So you find what you like about Assassin's Creed, and we reinforce that."

Odyssey further tweaks the combat that Origins introduced by allowing players to map abilities they find most appealing to face buttons. The basic controls are familiar if you've played the previous game, but once you move beyond basic attacks it gets interesting. The skill tree is divided between active and passive abilities. You can map four bow skills and four (and eventually eight) melee skills, depending on how you like to approach combat.

If you're an assassin, skills like Chain Assassination, which allows you to move quickly between takedowns, are a no-brainer. Warriors might gravitate toward skills like Shield Break, which removes those defensive objects from the combat equation. Hunters can pick from a variety of different arrow types and effects, including projectiles with explosive knockback. Skills use adrenaline, which is built up by performing attacks, such as assassinations, melee strikes, or successful arrow shots.

The system is designed to be flexible and to reward experimentation. You can remap your abilities whenever you want, and you can also respec at any point, for a nominal in-game fee.

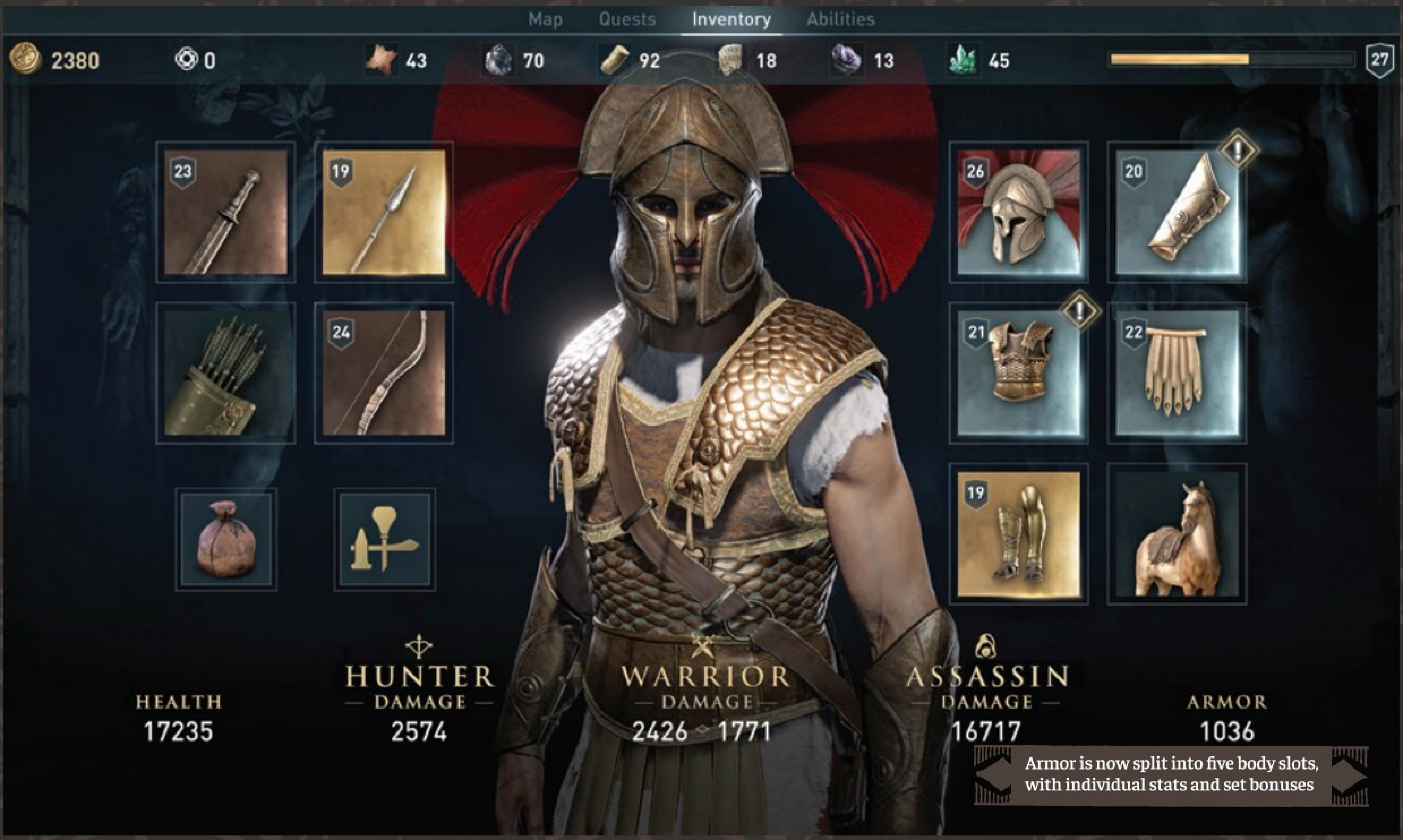




Hippokrates has important information about your main quest, but his priority is on his patients

My patients need me, but my notes on diseases of the mind were taken. Retrieve them ,and I will help you find what you seek.

GEARING UP



Armor is now split into five body slots, with individual stats and set bonuses

Gear remains an important part of the game – as well as one of its prime motivators for exploring – and Origins players will find it familiar. It's arranged by the same rarity tiers, but the overall gear meta has been tweaked to address some of the shortcomings Ubisoft Quebec saw in its earlier incarnation.

One simple example is that there's only one bow type now, instead of having three different bow types focused on distance, speed, and power. You can still do all that, but by using ranged abilities that you opt into instead of relying on the innate qualities of the weapon.

"If, say for example, you got a predator bow in Assassin's Creed Origins but you didn't like using the predator bow, but that was the highest level bow you had. Well, you're going to use that," says game director Scott Phillips. "We wanted to give the player more options of how they could apply those more special abilities on top of the bow."

The most significant change comes with the way that legendary items, the rarest and most coveted in-game gear, work. All weapons and armor pieces have specs, such as the amount of damage resistance they provide or the amount of hurt they generate. As weapons move up in tiers, those qualities become more interesting. Eventually, you have weapons that burst into flame or apply poison damage. Legendary items also have their own unique qualities, such as a helmet that lets you indefinitely breathe underwater. A new engraving system helps those special legendary affixes stay relevant.

As soon as you pick up a new legendary item, its unique quality is added to your list of possible engraving options. You can then add that specific affix to another item of any quality by visiting a shop and paying a fee. Engraving lower-quality items is fairly cheap, but you'll need some of the rarest in-game resources if you want to add a second unique ability to a legendary item. Considering the potential power boost that accompanies that move, it's probably worth it.

You can also earn special engraving recipes by playing the game. One example would be Beast Slayer, which you unlock by killing 25 predator animals. It provides an additional five-percent damage boost against animals, which will steadily increase as you hit additional milestones. Similarly, players who focus their attention on Spartan or Athenian enemies will eventually be rewarded for their efforts.

The engraving system looks like a smart way to entice players into experimenting with different items, though they can certainly keep a favorite item relevant – for a price. "We wanted it to be an interesting choice you'd have to make," Phillips says. "'I really love this bow, it's a legendary, but it's five levels below me and it's starting to get a little long in the tooth and I don't know if I want to keep this.' OK, I don't have enough obsidian to upgrade it. Do I want to get more obsidian and spend 15, 20, 30 minutes – whatever – to get that, or do I just want to take a rare or epic bow that's my level, so it does similar damage but the perks aren't as good but maybe I can engrave something on it, but it'll be similar? We wanted players to make that interesting choice."

Mercenaries

A complex web of world interactions in Assassin's Creed Odyssey can affect the player – and players can push back, as well. The world is in flux, and Sparta and Athens are wrestling over control of the region's 28 city-states. Each state has its own leadership, which can be weakened over time with help from players if they choose to fight soldiers, destroy supplies, and otherwise participate. You're a mercenary, after all.

"We wanted to have Greece at war," Phillips says. "Each of these areas would consider themselves independent, but you have these two major superpower states of Athens and Sparta which would form alliances with all of these little states. So they're allied with one or the other. And they're constantly changing who they're allied with, which is cool because it's accurate."

When a state is sufficiently weakened, it becomes easier to take out their leadership. Ordinarily, these powerful people live in heavily fortified areas with guards. Once the state's power is depleted, they'll change their behavior, perhaps fleeing to a less-secure outpost and making themselves an easier target for the player. After a leader is eliminated, the state is vulnerable to invasion from hostile neighbors. Those incursions take the form of large conquest battles, which ultimately decide what happens next.

"If the defending army is defeated, the faction changes, the nation power is reset, and things go back," Phillips says. "This happens with or without the player's interaction; obviously you can speed it up quite a bit by going in there and kicking some ass." Players can earn rewards for taking out leaders, too, which might act as a further incentive to get involved.

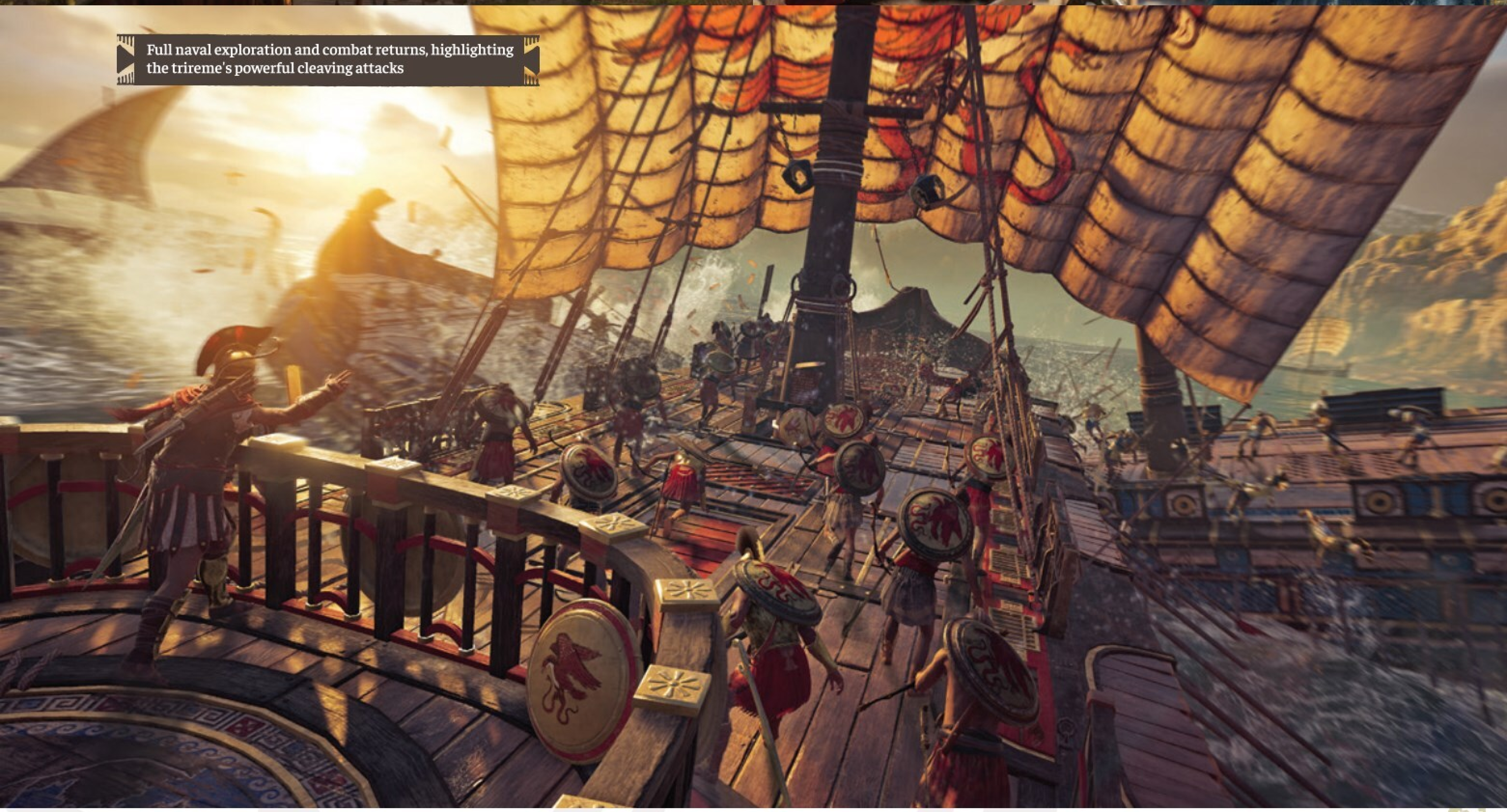
That mercenary attitude can get you in trouble, too, leading to perhaps the most interesting element of the game. Odyssey predates the formation of the Assassin Brotherhood by several hundred years, and Alexios and Kassandra aren't beholden to a creed. As such, it's up to the player to determine if everything is permitted – provided they're willing to deal with the consequences of their actions.

You're not the only mercenary in this world, and law is enforced through a system of bounties. Stay on the right side of the law, and you probably won't have much to worry about. Stray, and a price is put on your head – an escalating penalty similar to a wanted level in Grand Theft Auto. "As you're doing reprehensible actions like killing civilians or stealing stuff or sinking merchant ships on the ocean, the bounty goes up," Dumont says. "Lower-level bounties will attract lower level mercenaries, and then high-level bounties will attract high-level mercenaries, or more of them." In Origins, Bayek was hunted by the Phylakes, the pharaoh's powerful elite guard. Odyssey's mercenary system is similar, but it's not just a superficial element.

"You have a mercenary ladder, which is sort of showing you where you are and where you stand versus other mercenaries," Phillips says. "You'll be able to move up this ladder by killing or recruiting mercenaries ahead of you." There are 50 mercenaries on the ladder at any time, and new ones will refill the spots left when mercenaries are killed. Ranking up leads to rewards, too. As you become more famous, shops will give you a discount. After all, who wouldn't want to be known as

♥ I want you, too.
I don't feel the same.

What better place to get a view of Athens than on this massive statue of Athena herself?


Full naval exploration and combat returns, highlighting the trireme's powerful cleaving attacks

the blacksmith who keeps the number-one merc's blades sharp?

Some mercenaries are hand-crafted, designed with specific back stories and equipped with unique legendary items. Others are generated from a pool, similar to Shadow of Mordor's acclaimed Nemesis system of orc captains. "It's endless Phylakes," Dumont says. "And some have bears." These mercenaries provide some of the toughest challenges in the game. Once you have a bounty, the only way to get them off your back is to defeat them, pay off your bounty (which you can do at any time on the map screen), or track down and kill the person who initiated the bounty.

Defeating mercenaries doesn't necessarily mean planting them six-feet under, either. When you beat them down enough, you're given the choice to recruit them. "You put your hand down and say, 'Hey, buddy. Do you want a job?' Then he comes up and goes on your ship," Dumont says. Once recruited, mercenaries act as lieutenants on your ship, and they have special bonuses for the game's naval component. Players can also equip the Call to Arms ability, which summons a mercenary into regular combat to fight alongside you for a brief period of time.

Like the Phylakes, mercenaries have a habit of popping up when it's inconvenient. When enemy soldiers call in reinforcements with a brazier, mercenaries are likely to join in the action if you have a bounty. If you don't have a bounty, however, they're not hostile to you unless you get in their faces. Unlike the Phylakes, they've got other things to do than mess with you if they aren't getting paid. Players who want to fight mercenaries but aren't role-playing as criminals need not worry – there's an arena in the game where mercs meet up and fight, so you don't need to build up a bounty to trigger their appearance if you're white-hatting your way through the world.

"When we were talking to the Assassin's Creed Origins team about what they wanted to do, one of their big pushes was persistence," Phillips says. "They wanted NPCs in the world to have schedules and agendas and do things in the world and exist not just as drones. We absolutely wanted to do that, and we've continued that system as well for our world." They also expanded those systems, with leaders attacking each other and mercenaries responding to contracts, in addition to regular people going about their days in Greece.

A TRIUMVIRATE OF PAIN

Regardless of whether you like stalking enemies or smashing faces with a mace that's nearly as tall as you are, Ubisoft Quebec says players can handle combat as they see fit. To prove the point, Phillips loaded up three different saves, each focusing on an end-game build centered on one of the three combat pillars.

Origins' change to an RPG-based system had the most significant impact on players who enjoyed pure assassin gameplay. Ubisoft Montreal moved away from the one-shot assassinations of the past, requiring that players keep their hidden blades leveled and stay in their lane. Players who attempted to sneak up on higher-level enemies faced the indignity of having their attacks shrugged off by opponents who seemed more annoyed than threatened.

When we first saw and played Assassin's Creed Odyssey, we were told that assassin builds were viable, even though our attempts fell flat. After watching Phillips' assassin infiltrate a fort using a smart mix of gear and abilities, we can confirm that it's true. His loadout kit included Rush Assassination (a deadly ranged attack), Critical Assassination (converts adrenaline to a 300-percent assassination-damage strike), Hero Strike (deals assassination damage in conflict), and Vanish (a smoke bomb, which, like healing, is now an ability and not a consumable).

Phillips approached the fort through the side, and remained hidden in foliage while he surveyed the scene. "Your main way of approaching is generally going to be to scout and then use the bushes," says game director Scott Phillips. "Some of the things I really wanted to get rid of was the haystacks for hiding – I felt like Assassin's Creed has moved past that, and we needed to do something more fresh and not be stuck with the hay bales. I'm glad we don't have that. It always felt sort of silly." Your character has an eagle, Ikaros, which can help scout from the air. If you liked the traditional eagle vision (minus the eagle), you can use the Revelation perk, which emits a pulse that highlights nearby enemies and interactive objects.

You can't auto-assassinate the tougher captains and elite guards with the single press of a button, but Critical Assassination helps level the field. After popping that ability, Phillips takes down an unsuspecting captain in one strike. He could have blasted him off the edge of a cliff, too, if he'd opted for the slightly less stealthy Sparta Kick.

The run doesn't go off flawlessly, and Phillips ends up getting detected. It's broad daylight, which makes it tough to get away. He gets some space by using Vanish and also calling in an ally, who provides a quick distraction. "The main thing that I'm happy with the stealth is you have a lot more tools in order to approach a situation how you want to approach it," Phillips says.

The warrior run is more straightforward. Thanks to powerful abilities like Ring of Chaos (an area of effect stun), Bull Rush (a move that lets characters charge through enemies), and Shield Break, Phillips walks through the front gate and starts smashing. It doesn't hurt that his character wields a legendary heavy-blunt weapon with two affixes that sets enemies ablaze early and often. His abilities have been leveled up to their third and highest tier, so when he unleashes Ring of Chaos it launches enemies into the air for a moment before they land in a daze. Finally, there's this: "I'm pretty good, not to toot my own horn," Phillips jokes.

Players who opt for a warrior play style can hit like a trireme, but they're not invulnerable. "Tables can turn on you pretty fast," Phillips cautions.

The hunter run holds some of the biggest surprises, starting with a fall. As he approaches the fort, Phillips takes what looks like a suicidal leap from the top of a cliff. Instead of splattering onto the earth below, he gracefully rolls and continues moving.

"One of the things for us is that we have a very mountainous world, and we didn't want the player dying constantly," Phillips says. "As you level up, you start taking much less damage from falling. Eventually, you start taking no damage from falling from great distances." It's a significant change for a game that has relied on bales of hay for those kinds of stunts. Why the shift? "It gets really frustrating, and honestly it doesn't add much to do that to the player. Going up is a little bit more enjoyable, but doing down is just sort of, 'Okay, let's get down.'"

Back on solid ground, Phillips' hunter has a deadly ranged arsenal that includes a spread shot, arrows that can be steered in midair, and the ability to tame animals. He's wielding the legendary item Paris' Bow, which adds additional armor penetration and increased damage for hunter abilities. For the majority of this run, nobody knows what even hit them.

Phillips finds a perch away from the action and snipes his foes from afar. One Spartan is wounded, and he circles around to try and attack. That's when Phillips pulls out a particularly cool new ability, the Ghost Arrow. This projectile is essentially a sanctioned wall hack, and it'll pass effortlessly through walls, rocks, and even other enemies. "That's a challenge, and I'll be looking forward to the YouTube videos of people doing that," he says.

Bow users can now use an overpower attack, too. Like with melee weapons, this powerful move consumes three stamina bars, but the results are worth it. An overpowered bow attack launches a massive explosion with knockback effects. "The overpower is good if you can get multiple enemies close by together and get it in the middle of them," Phillips says. "You can create a beautiful flower of flying enemies."

Players will be able to purchase a variety of different mounts, and not all of them are horses

Turning The Seas Red

Take a look at a map, and you'll realize that, as trusty as it might be, taking your steed across the land isn't going to be the smartest play.

"We have Greece and a lot of different islands, so we needed a way to travel to those islands," says game designer Charles Benoit. "Also, the fact that naval seems pretty cool and fun to play when we looked at the history. One of the goals was to bring this to players in a seamless way, so you'd be able to get on your ship when you want, get off your ship when you want. You have your ship at the beginning of the game, and it's with you until the end."

Odyssey marks the return of full naval exploration and combat. Ubisoft Quebec builds off those earlier foundations, but also expands to incorporate more of the choice-based systems that run throughout the game.

The naval component is tightly integrated through many of the game's other systems. The ship is where the mercenaries you recruit live, and the up-to-four assigned lieutenants can provide special naval benefits, such as increasing the damage your ship-based attacks output, or adding a little extra oomph to your speed bursts.

Ship-to-ship combat in this era was different than the naval battles players experienced in Black Flag, and the gameplay reflects that. The Greek triremes were speedy ships, and ramming was one of the preferred methods of attacks. Huge rams were installed on their prows, which could be used to cleave their enemies in half.

"The naval in Odyssey is very physical; not only can you ram people, but you can sideswipe them with the back of your ship," says technical lead James Carnahan. "It's more physical and less dependent on long-range attacks. It became important to make sure the boat was maneuverable. With boosting, which you can use by consuming stamina, you can double your speed for a short period of time, but it also allows you to turn more quickly and you can drift as well." Carnahan says that there's even a Mario Kart-style speed boost when you hold a drift long enough and release it. "It feels really good, boosting and drifting into position for a ram and then slamming into them with your ship."

Your crew can also fire arrows at longer range and hurl javelins at ships that venture close by. If you focus your attacks on one specific section of an enemy ship, it's likely to crumble and eventually burst into flame. At that point, enemy sailors will jump from the ship in a panic, possibly into the jaws of nearby sharks. Meanwhile, the ship will be stunned, allowing you to focus on another target.

In a neat bit of attention to detail, the NPCs on other ships aren't just there for show, and you can focus your ranged attacks on them, too. "Each arrow is coming from one of those guys," Carnahan says. "Kill three guys, and you have three less arrows." That may make it easier for you to board a vessel. If you can successfully board a ship and take out its crew, there's a chance you can find some great loot for your character. If you're more interested in getting raw materials, cleaving enemy ships is the way to go.

Players who enjoy the naval elements can pursue a variety of customization options, such as crew cosmetics, ram and hull upgrades, and new sails and figureheads. Epic ships sail in the outer reaches of the world, which promise additional challenges – as well as exclusive cosmetics to make your ship stand out even further.

The sea looks like a great place to explore, but don't think it's a sanctuary. If you have a bounty on your head, mercenaries will follow you onto the water. If that all seems too intense, take solace in the fact that you can choose to ignore most of that depth and consider your ship another means of traveling around.

"We're not a naval game, but we have a ship that you can use for exploration and for fighting," Dumont says. "We're not forcing you to [engage with] naval too much; some players like it, some players don't. It's much more of an autonomy-driven thing."

Your Own Odyssey

After spending hours playing the game and even more time talking about it with the passionate people behind Odyssey, it's clear that the team has been thinking of players during every step of the process. Just as some players like the naval element, some don't, and Ubisoft Quebec has tried to accommodate both preferences.

Origins was a great, ambitious game, and Odyssey follows along the same course. It's not just an iterative release, though. The desire to delve into meaningful RPG elements is apparent, and from what we've played it's succeeded on that front.

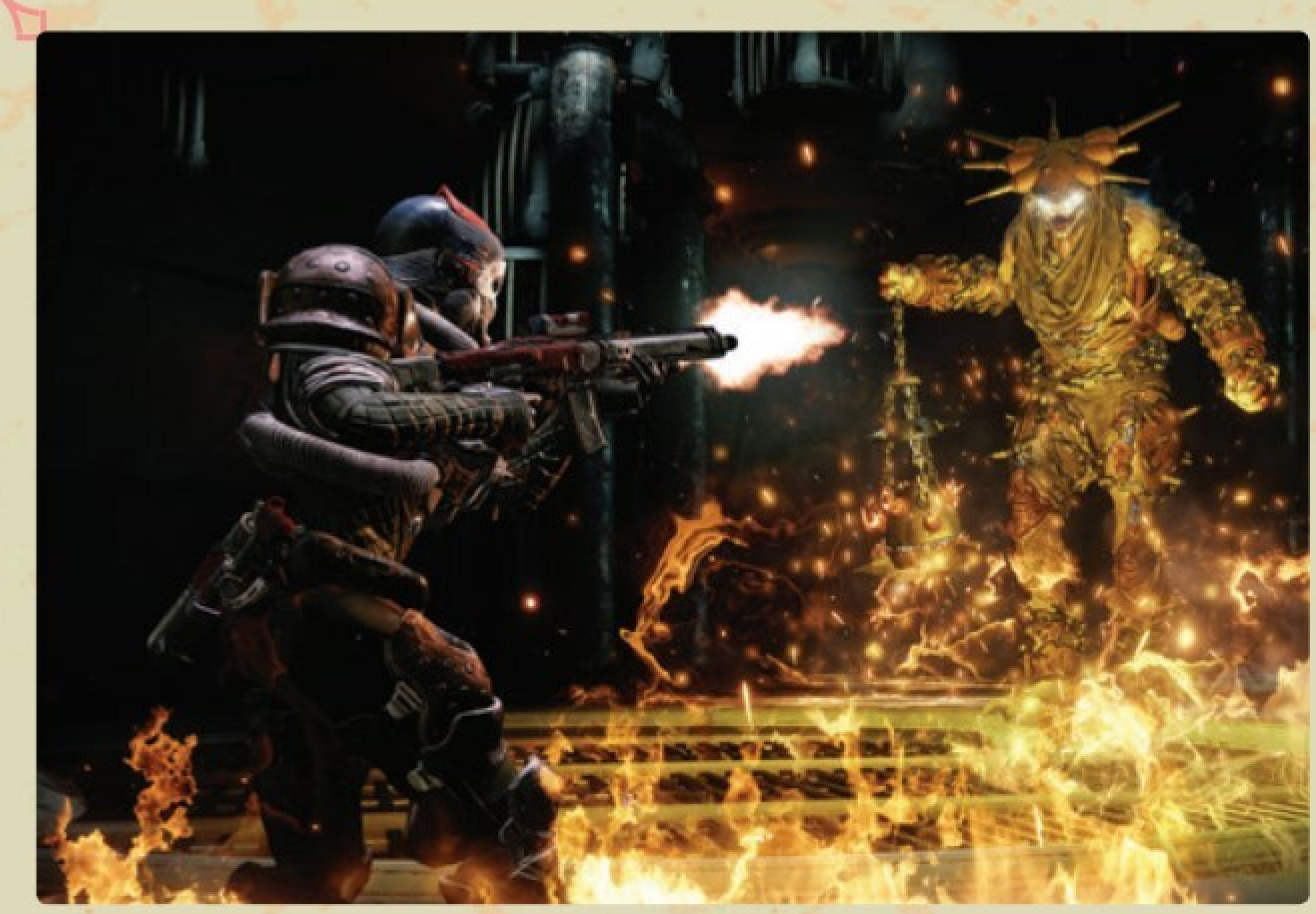
"I think every team has its own sort of style, and I think when you play the games I think you can feel the two different styles," Phillips says. "I think Odyssey will be a little more flexible and fun and maybe a little more explosive and surprising in that way." ◆

For more on Assassin's Creed Odyssey, visit our hub at gameinformer.com/acodyssey. It's packed with exclusive features and interviews. In addition, check out our site for in-depth previews on Odyssey, including hours of video footage from our earlier demo

The GAMES OF FALL

WITH GAMES LIKE God of War, Monster Hunter: World, and Dragon Ball FighterZ, 2018 has already proven itself to be a stellar year for video games, and with games like Red Dead Redemption 2, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and lots more on the horizon, the future looks bright. Along with the sports games we look forward to every year (look for NBA 2K, Live, and FIFA previews on pages 70, 72, and 68), we look at the fall lineup before it starts in earnest and highlight the games we can't wait to play when it starts getting cold outside.

by Game Informer Staff



DESTINY 2: FORSAKEN

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** September 4

The stakes are high for Bungie to produce major improvements and content in Destiny 2's second year, and what we've seen so far looks promising. As we detailed in last month's cover story, the Forsaken expansion brings with it an entirely new campaign, taking players to two new locations: the western-style Tangled Shore and the more surreal Dreaming City. Forsaken also marks a new tone for the game, which is taking a darker direction and killing one of its most jovial characters, Cayde-6, to prove it. New modes, maps, and an overhauled weapon system round out the expansion, and we're hoping it delivers for both casual and dedicated players.

DRAGON QUEST XI: ECHOES OF AN ELUSIVE AGE

PLATFORM: PS4, PC **RELEASE:** September 4

Everyone's favorite slime-infested series is back! After an eight-year break with only spin-offs to tide us over, a new entry is upon us, and this time it's back on the big screen. Dragon Quest XI sticks to its classic roots, but is hoping to charm a new generation of gamers with its simplicity and sense of adventure. Strategize your way through battles via its turn-based combat system by taking advantage of your spells, buffs, and tension-induced special attacks. It's up to you to save the world, fighting iconic baddies and discovering new and unique lands. This is an adventurer's delight.

SPIDER-MAN

PLATFORM: PS4 **RELEASE:** September 7

Gamers will soon get the chance to experience Spider-Man in his prime. Peter Parker has been wearing his red-and-blue spandex for the better part of a decade, but will the power he has amassed be enough to take down the threat of a new Sinister Six? Developed by Insomniac Games', this open-world Spider-Man experience blends sophisticated web swinging with a fairly deep upgrade system allowing players to select their own powers for combat and city traversal. The game also offers a crafting system so players can assemble some of Spider-Man's more recognizable suits, including the Iron Spider getup from *Avengers: Infinity War*.

Bauer
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NHL 19

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** September 14

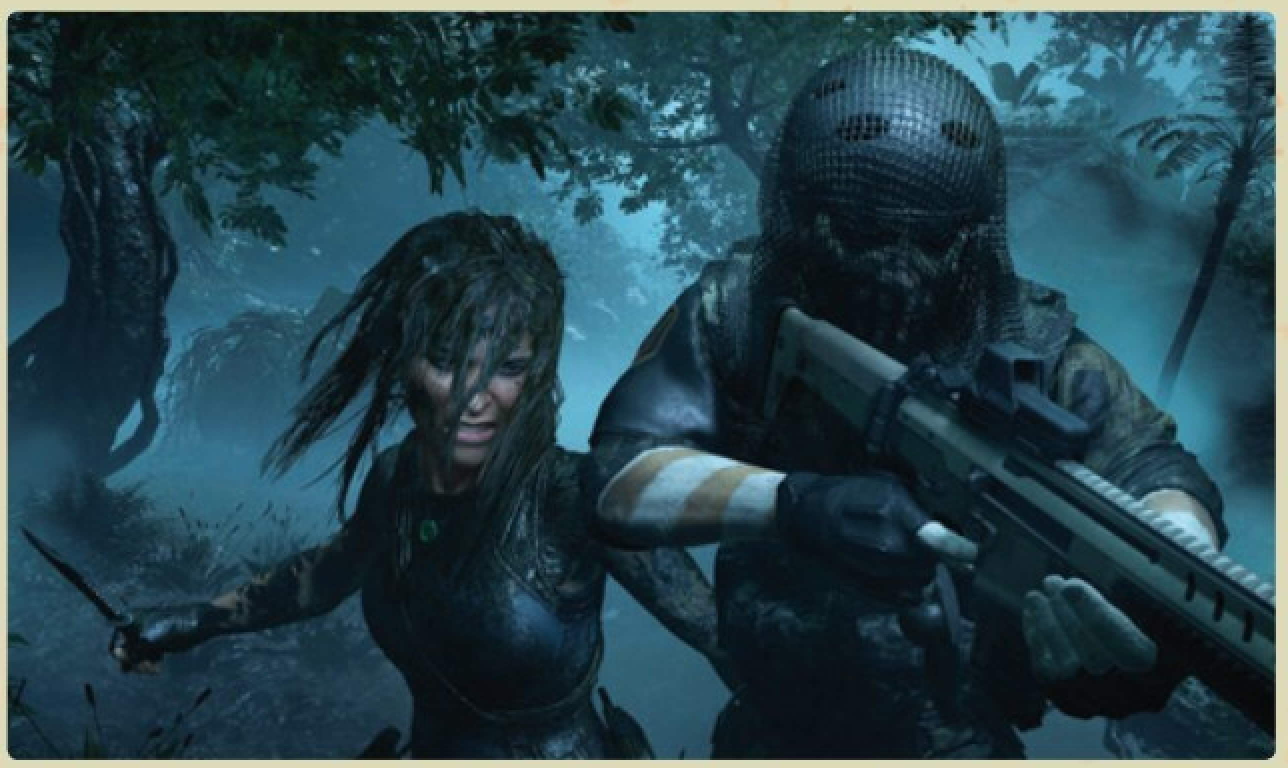
NHL 19 hops over the boards with a brand new (and long overdue) skating system that makes it easier to burst out of stops, move in tight spaces, and threaten defenders with speed. Couple that with a revamped physics system that allows for more realistic physicality (including helicopter checks), and this is the most excited we've been to strap on the skates this console generation.

NHL 19 also introduces more customization into created players, allowing skaters to tweak the height and weight of their EASHL players like the good old days. Users have more control of their playing style, as well, thanks to a few traits and specialization slots that modify the skills of their selected archetype. A new scouting system gives franchise mode a much-needed refresh, and more than 200 hockey legends will appear in the game this year.

SHADOW OF THE TOMB RAIDER

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** September 14

Eidos Montréal's first turn at the wheel for the mainline Tomb Raider series sends Lara to Latin America as she races against the paramilitary organization Trinity to find an ancient Mayan relic and prevent another apocalypse. Like the last two games in the series, Shadow focuses on action survival, but Lara has acquired a great number of tools over the last few years that will aid her on this journey. Lara can now rappel down cliff walls thanks to a "new" invention called the rope. Combat has also been tweaked, and our intrepid explorer can reenter stealth if she disengages from combat, encouraging a greater level of cat-and-mouse gameplay.



SPYRO REIGNITED TRILOGY

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One **RELEASE:** September 21

Similar to the recent Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy remake, this collection, dubbed the Reignited Trilogy, gathers and remakes the very first Spyro the Dragon, Ripto's Rage, and Year of the Dragon together into one set. Developer Toys for Bob (of Skylanders fame) is remaining as faithful as possible to the trilogy, emulating the exact same layout of the original games, but is taking artistic license where it will improve the game. Instead of a flat green texture for the ground, you now have blades of grass; Spyro and his enemies all have new animations to give them more character; And all the dialogue has been re-recorded to make the three-game experience more consistent. We just hope the series' gameplay holds up after 20 years.

VALKYRIA CHRONICLES 4

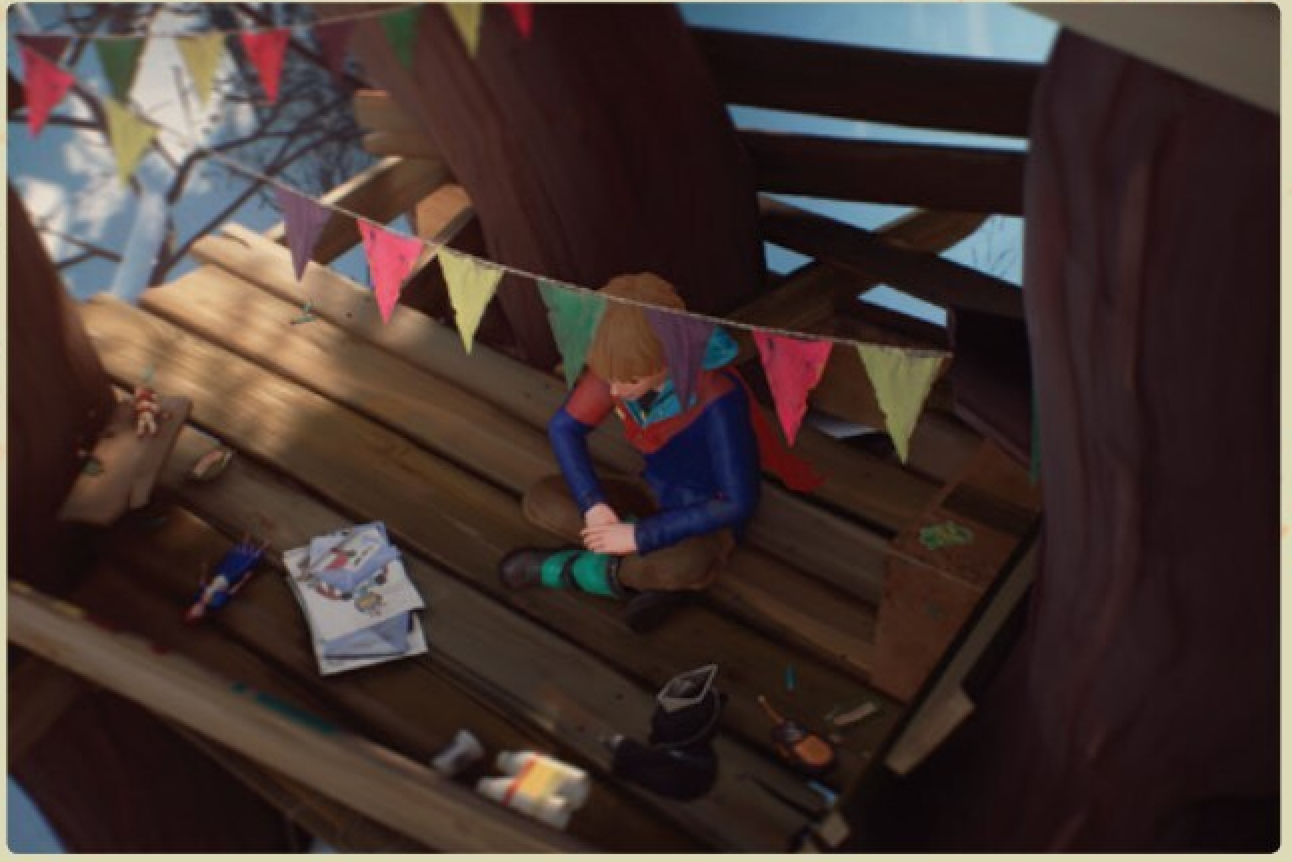
PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **RELEASE:** September 25

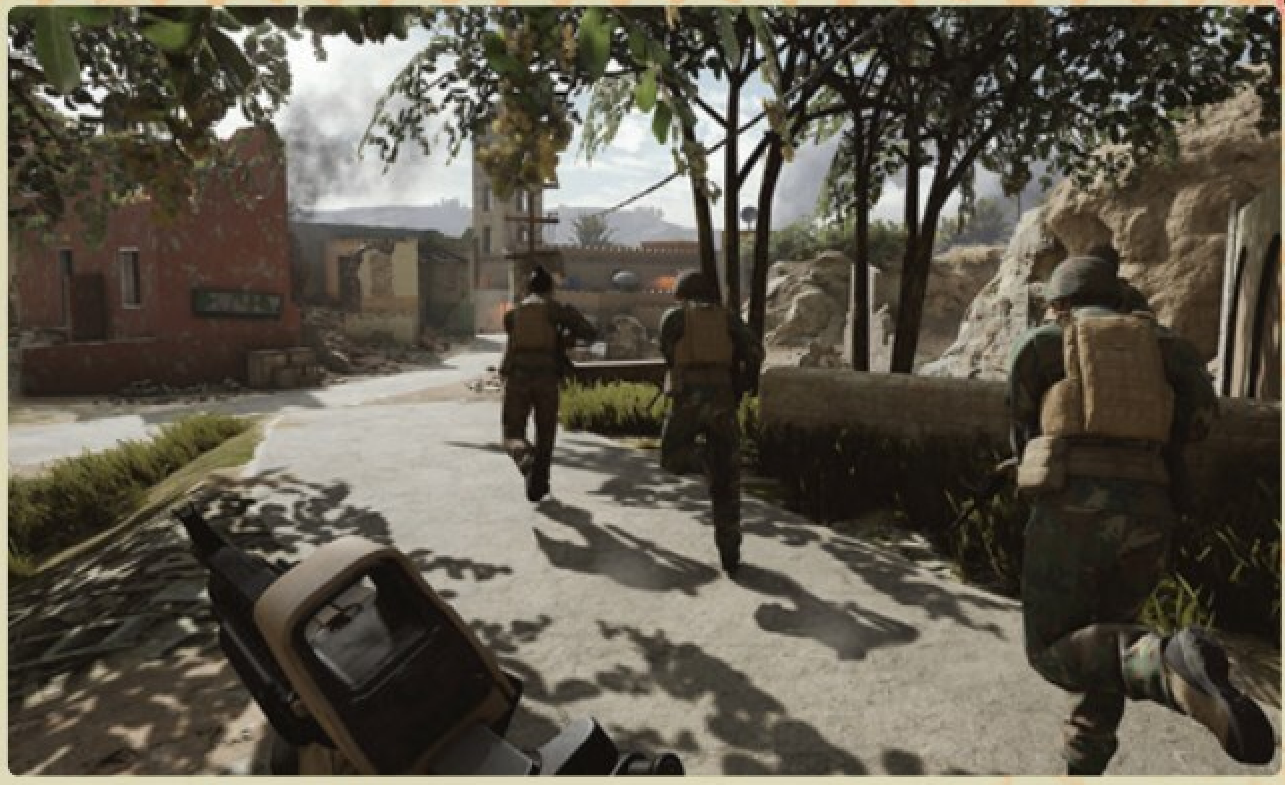
After being relegated to handhelds and an action-focused spin-off, Valkyria Chronicles 4 is going back to consoles with an entry more in line with what made the first game such a cult hit. This time around, you play as Claude Wallace, who commands Squad E during the second Europan War. Expect the tactical gameplay of past entries but with a few new winkles, such as a new Grenadier class and a Last Stand ability that triggers when close to death to give your squad bonuses. Bonding with your squad is still a priority, as it affects their performance and skills in battle. This entry could be the comeback we've been waiting for.

LIFE IS STRANGE 2: EPISODE 1

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** September 27

Both the first season of Life is Strange and the standalone The Amazing Adventures of Captain Spirit are superb adventure games with heartfelt and daring narratives. Memorable characters like Chloe Price have left a lasting impression in video game storytelling as well. We know next to nothing about Life is Strange 2, outside of decisions carrying over from Captain Spirit (seen below), but we're excited to see where Dontnod is taking this promising series and if we'll see any familiar faces from Arcadia Bay.





INSURGENCY: SANDSTORM

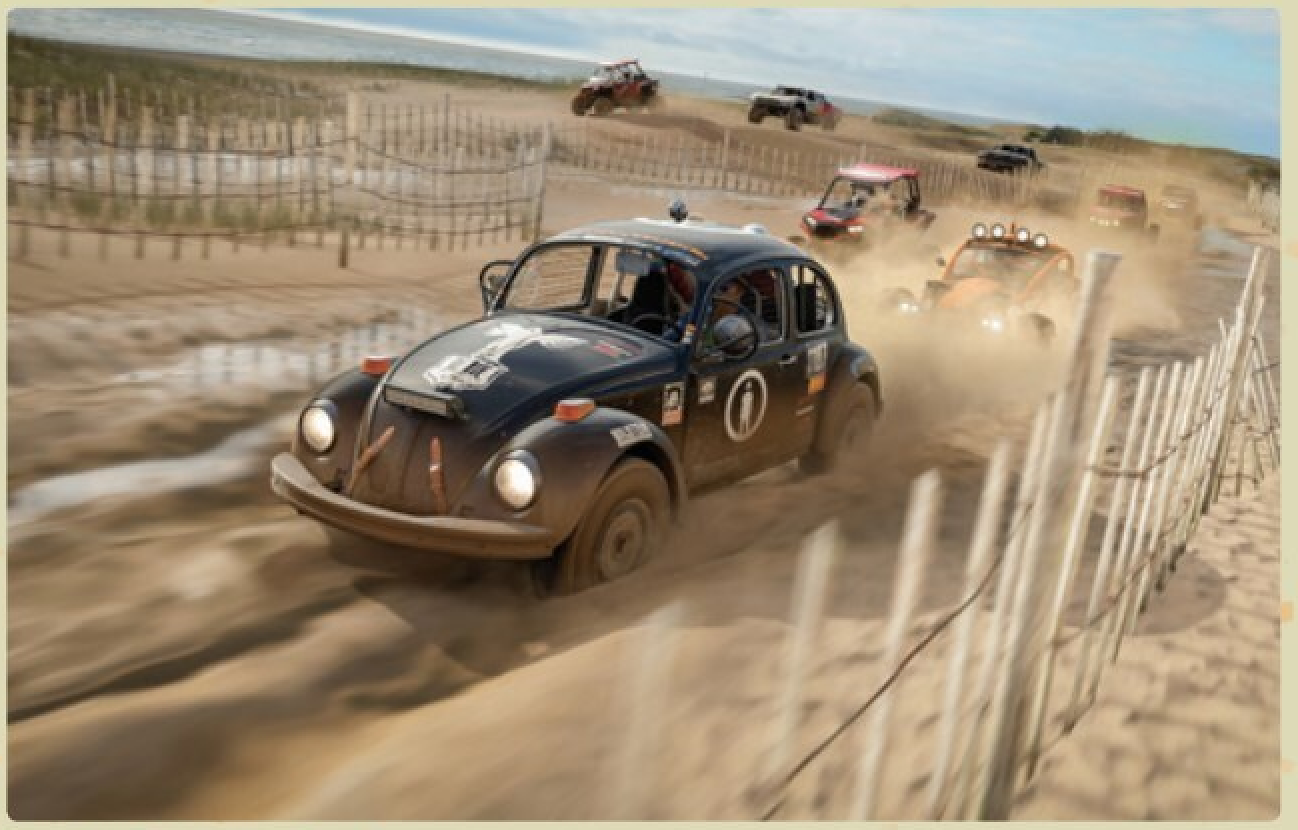
PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: September 2018 (PC), 2019 (Consoles)

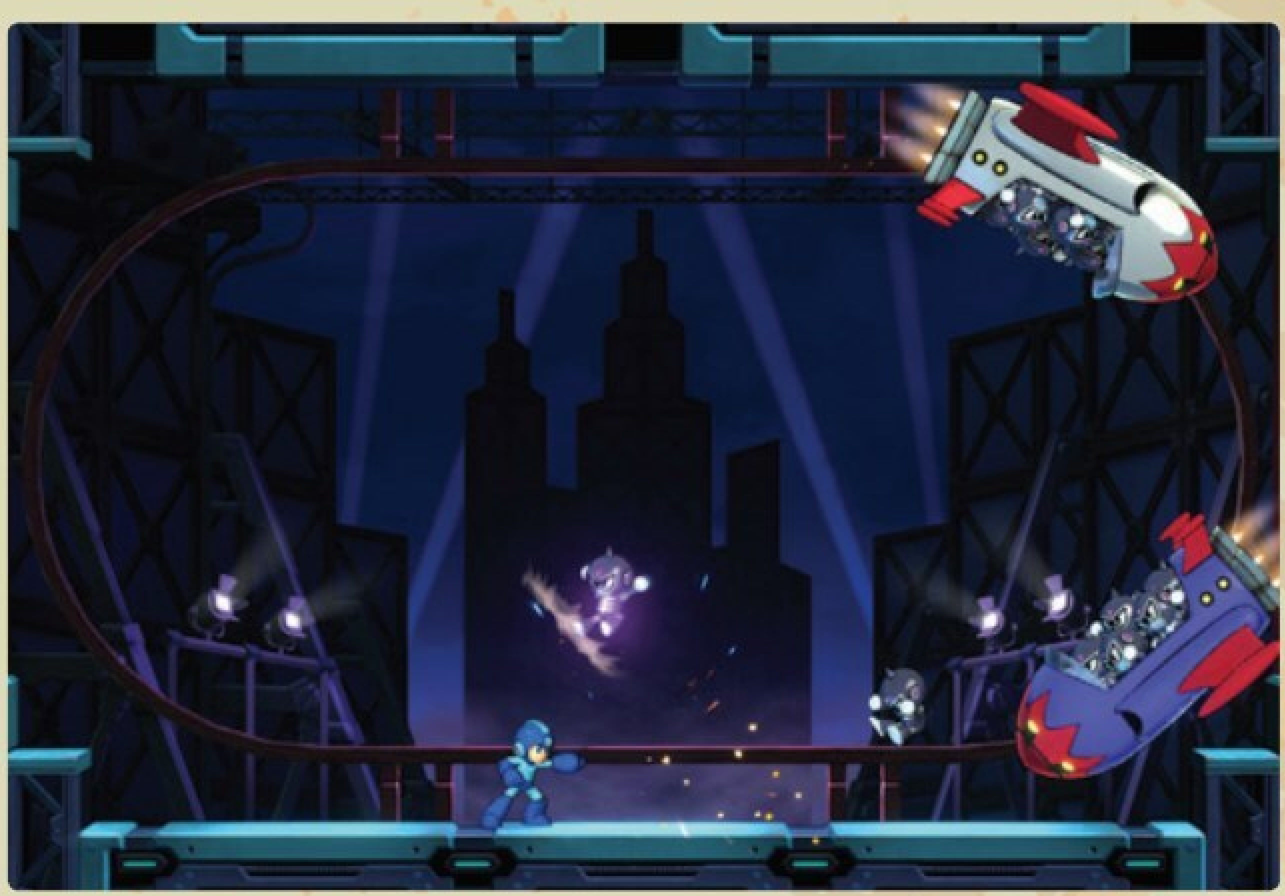
Insurgency began its life as a Half-Life mod before becoming its own experience and finding a large audience that embraced the game for its realistic approach to military weapon simulation and close-quarters tactical combat. The sequel moves to Unreal Engine 4 to boost its visuals, and expands on its high-pressure, cooperative-focused shooting. Sandstorm also raises the realism by taking bullet drop physics into account, and factoring for bullet penetration power. You can also do things like reload faster by dropping magazines, and quietly and carefully open doors for a stealthy approach against your opponents. Military shooters are plentiful, but Sandstorm hopes to make its mark by making the battle more intimate.

FORZA HORIZON 4

PLATFORM: Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** October 2

When you see one of your friends racing down the road in Forza Horizon 4, what are you going to do? Are you going to challenge them to an event race or run off together and find the latest Bucket List challenge? We're excited to explore these possibilities as the series ditches the online avatars and gives you the option to bring real people into your world. Further opportunities are available whether you want to focus on taking photos, get a job, or buy property in developer Playground Games' version of Britain. It sounds weird to look forward to some of the non-racing elements of a racing title, but the series' potential has always lied in bringing both together.





MEGA MAN 11

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **RELEASE:** October 2

After years of Mega Man fans feeling neglected, franchise devotees have their hands full lately. In addition to four Legacy Collection releases spanning the entire mainline and X series, currently out, Capcom is launching Mega Man 11 this October. With gorgeous visuals, a healthy roster of Robot Masters, and a fun new Double Gears mechanic that allows you to slow down time or power up your Mega Buster shots, Mega Man 11 effectively mixes old with new. This delicate balance means Mega Man 11 feels like a great modernization of the classic franchise while not straying far from what made it great in the first place.

ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** October 5

It's not exactly a secret that we're looking forward to Ubisoft Quebec's upcoming Assassin's Creed game. For further evidence, look at the cover of this magazine. Needless to say, we're thrilled about the game's ancient Greek setting, which has been on players' wish lists for years. Odyssey is shaping up to be one of the year's most ambitious adventures, with choices that actually matter, exciting (and flexible) combat, and the return of full naval exploration and battles. Check out our feature on Assassin's Creed Odyssey starting on page 44 for a detailed rundown of what you can expect to see this October.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 4

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** October 12

Call of Duty's next annual release may not have traditional single-player offerings, but the three-pronged attack will be as strong as ever if Treyarch can live up to its lofty ambitions. With mulitiplayer that features an ever-so-slight push toward teamplay, three different, highly customizable Zombie modes, and the promise of CoD breaking into the battle royale genre with Blackout, the franchise isn't afraid to stray from the tried-and-true. Blackout mode is the big question mark, but what is known is enticing – an enormous map featuring locations inspired by Black Ops favorites, a full ensemble of vehicles for land, sky, and sea, and the ability to play as classic characters from the entirety of the Black Ops series are all on deck.

LEGO DC SUPER VILLAINS

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC **RELEASE:** October 16

TT Games has released Lego game after Lego game at a relentless cadence over the years, and it's been difficult to keep up with each one. The developers seem to have had a tough time, too, as recent quality slippages have shown. That's why we're excited about Lego DC Super Villains. It lets players blast through an original (and silly) story as a player-created villain – which sounds great – but it's also been the focus of a renewed studio initiative toward smoothing out rough patches that have persisted for years. Platforming is easier, puzzles make more sense, and the action flows better overall. Some guy named Mark Hamill also lends his voice to The Joker, too.

STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, Switch **RELEASE:** October 16

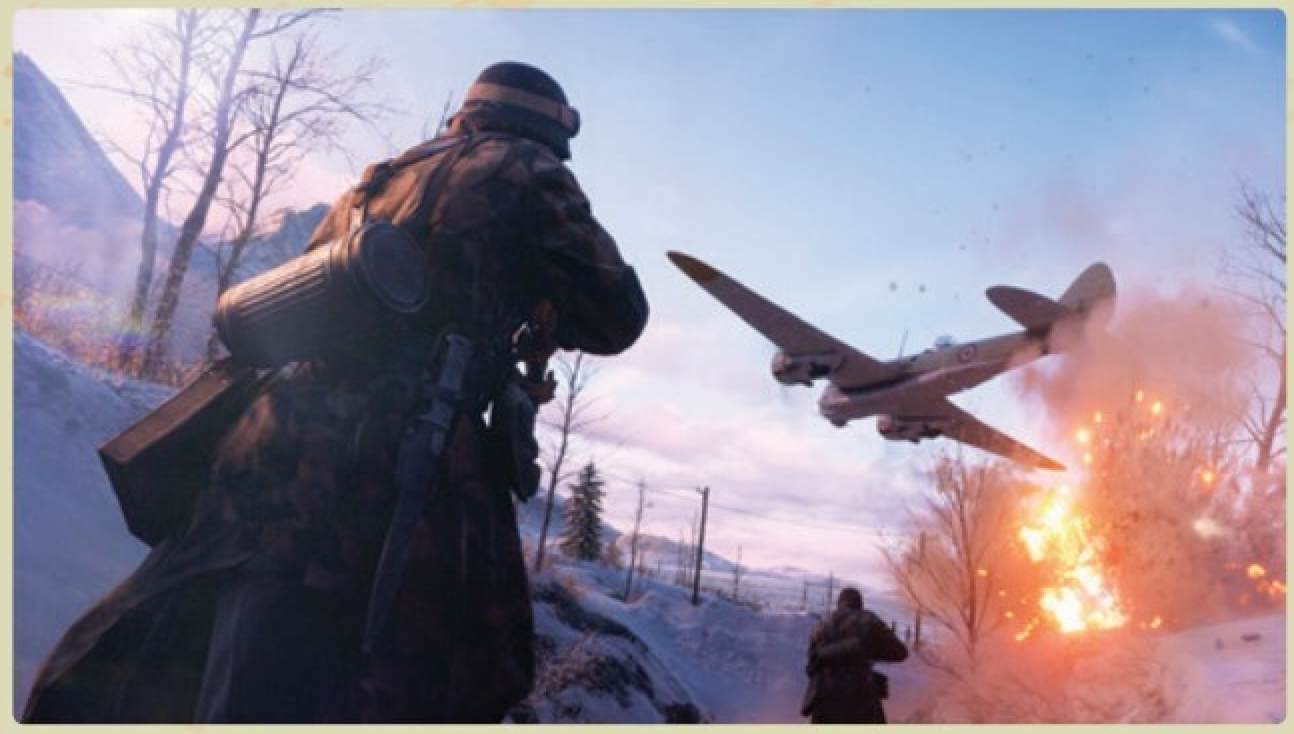
The life is already fading from the toys-to-life genre, but Ubisoft is still throwing its hat in the ring with Starlink, a sci-fi shooter that allows users to build and modify their own physical toy space-ship and then import their vehicle into the game. Fortunately, you don't have to participate in model building to engage in Starlink's highflying dogfights. Players can use their hyperdrive to explore an entire solar system of planets, collect loot from random encounters, and complete side missions on different worlds. Switch users can even tear through space as Star Fox in his iconic Arwing.

BATTLEFIELD V

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** October 19

After 16 years, DICE returns to the original Battlefield setting, but don't expect a greatest hits playlist of World War II battles. Instead, the Swedish studio is digging deeper into the annals of history to uncover untold stories in new settings we've never experienced before in a WWII game.

Battlefield V also refocuses the action on squad play by limiting resources to encourage sharing, removing health regeneration, and giving squad leaders dangerous new deployments that can turn the tide of battle. Fan-favorite modes like conquest return, but the centerpiece experience is Grand Operations, long-form battles where the settings and objectives evolve over the course of play. The more playful soldier customization has its haters, but however you feel about mechanical prosthetics, the rest of the BFV package sounds promising.



SOULCALIBUR VI

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** October 19

Although it's moving back the timeline several years and bringing back the characters who made the series shine in the first place, Soulcalibur VI isn't just a return to basics. A new rock-paper-scissors-style move called the Reversal Edge gives players a way to swing momentum back in their favor if they can guess correctly, and Soul Charges let you sacrifice a bar of super meter for a few seconds of increased damage, giving fights more variety. The guest character this time around is Geralt of Rivia, so even if system-level changes don't mean much, you should still get a kick out of using Agni mid-combo.

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One **RELEASE:** October 26

See all those fresh new faces in the Van der Linde gang? Don't get too attached to them, because you know they aren't making it too far across the western expanse of Red Dead Redemption II. This companion piece to the 2010 Wild West masterpiece goes back in time to chronicle how the relentless lawmen and bounty hunters thin the ranks of the infamous outlaw gang before employing John Marston to finish the job.

Playing as Dutch's right-hand man Arthur Morgan, expect plenty of shootouts and desperate situations as the public enemies flee across the gorgeous open world robbing banks and hijacking trains. Given the limited information trickling out of Rockstar HQ, we still have lots of questions about how RDR II evolves the open-world experience, but we're ready to saddle up nonetheless.

OVERKILL'S THE WALKING DEAD

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** November 6

Overkill's tactical take on the popular series from Robert Kirkman has been in gestation for several years now. After a barrage of CGI trailers, we finally saw the game in action at this year's E3 and it looks like…The Walking Dead but mixed with Payday? But in all seriousness, we're curious to see if this odd combination of genres will make this adaptation of The Walking Dead stand out in the bloody, dismembered-limb-populated sea of games that have emerged from the license in the past decade.

HITMAN 2

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** November 13

The Hitman series has had a rough few years. Developer IO Interactive had to purchase the rights to its own franchise away from Square Enix and then it moved shop over to Warner Bros. Interactive in order to develop Hitman 2. The episodic structure of the 2016 Hitman has been dropped in favor of releasing a complete game all at once, but the core mechanics important to the reboot are moving forward. Hitman 2 will still feature huge, living levels with multiple avenues for completing objectives as well as new mechanics, like better indicators that you're truly being stealthy and more ways to blend in. We didn't love Hitman as an episodic series, so we're happy to see it move away from that structure for part two.

FALLOUT 76

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** November 14

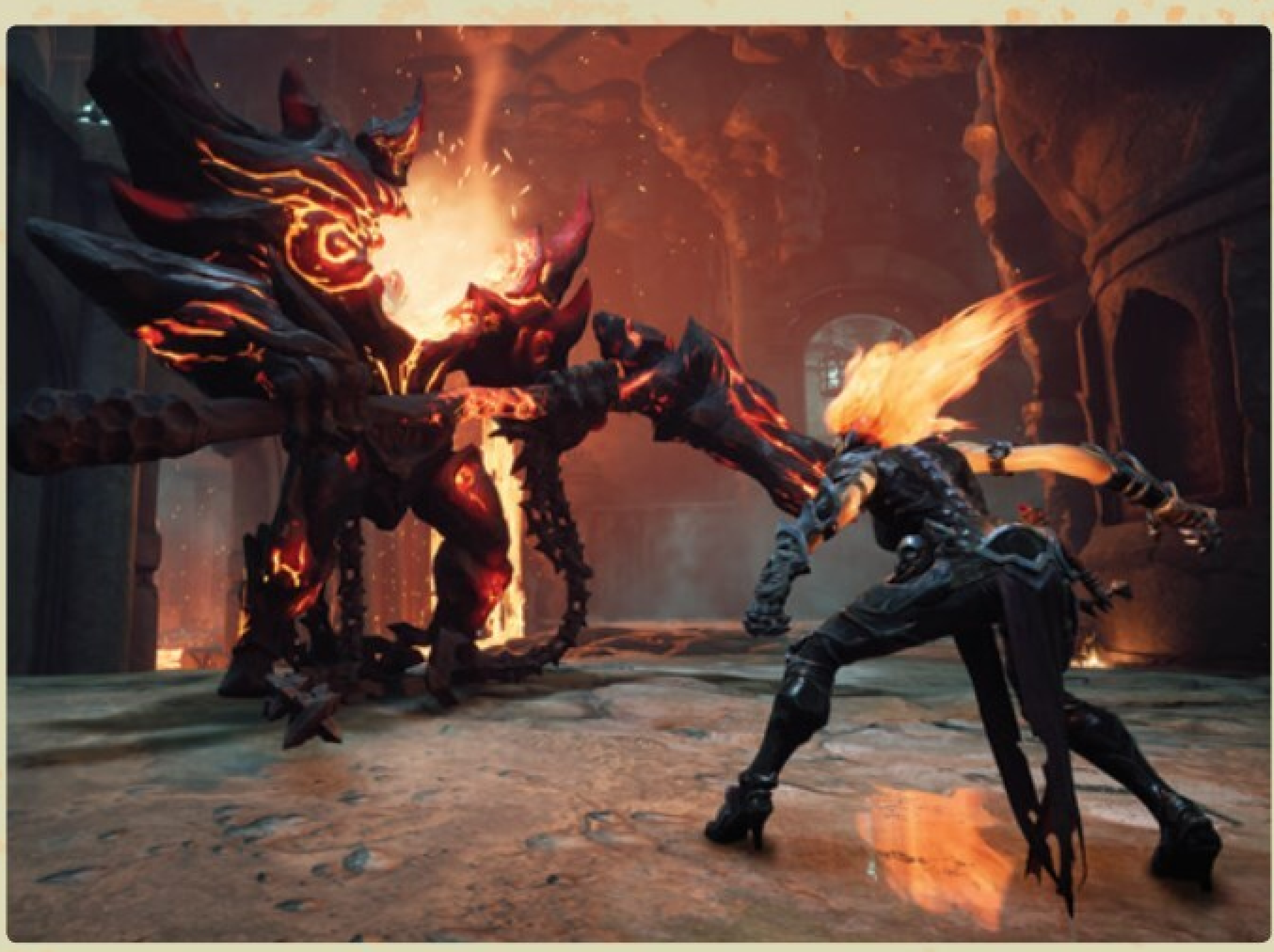
Bethesda Game Studios is tackling online multiplayer with the Fallout brand. While solo play is available, players can team up with up to three others to take on a sizable (four times the size of Fallout 4) world. The backdrop of West Virginia gives players a rustic and rowdy locale to explore, which includes encounters with cryptozoology favorites such as the Mothman and the Flatwoods monster. Of note is that the game doesn't feature any human NPC characters – every person you run into is another player. Storytelling still occurs through robots, environment, and audio, but it's an interesting departure for the franchise. We're curious to see what happens when we crawl out of the vault later this year.

POKÉMON LET'S GO PIKACHU & LET'S GO EEVEE

PLATFORM: Switch **RELEASE:** November 16

It's not the console Pokémon RPG that was promised at E3 2017 by The Pokémon Company CEO Tsunekazu Ishihara (that one is coming next year), but Let's Go Pikachu and Eevee is an interesting sort-of spinoff for the series. The game is a remake of Pokémon Yellow, but it communicates with Pokémon Go, eliminates random battles, and uses motion controls to simulate the act of catching a Pokémon with the aid of the Poké Ball Plus accessory, which is an optional pack-in with the game.

Younger players who recently discovered Pokémon will definitely want to check out the game as it has been simplified to be easier to grasp. Whether or not that will appeal to the hardcore Pokémon players who remember playing Yellow back in 1999, however, remains to be seen.



DARKSIDERS III

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** November 27

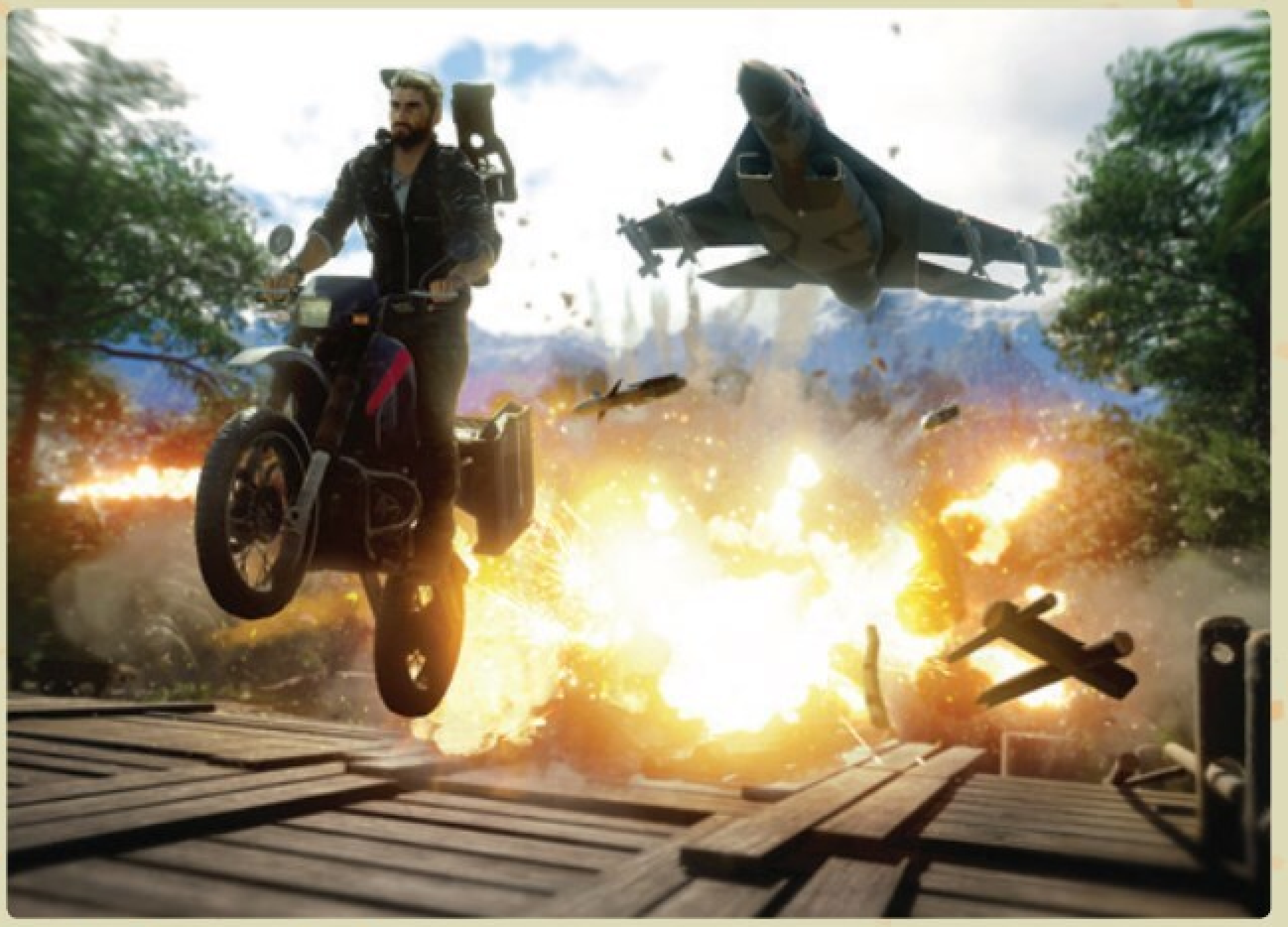
The first two Darksiders games borrowed heavily from classics like God of War, Zelda, and Diablo in the best way. The story following The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a thrilling adventure that feels like a mash-up of some of the best games ever made, which is why we were disappointed when the franchise's developer and publisher fell apart in 2012. Thankfully, many of the members of the games' original team came together to continue the story.

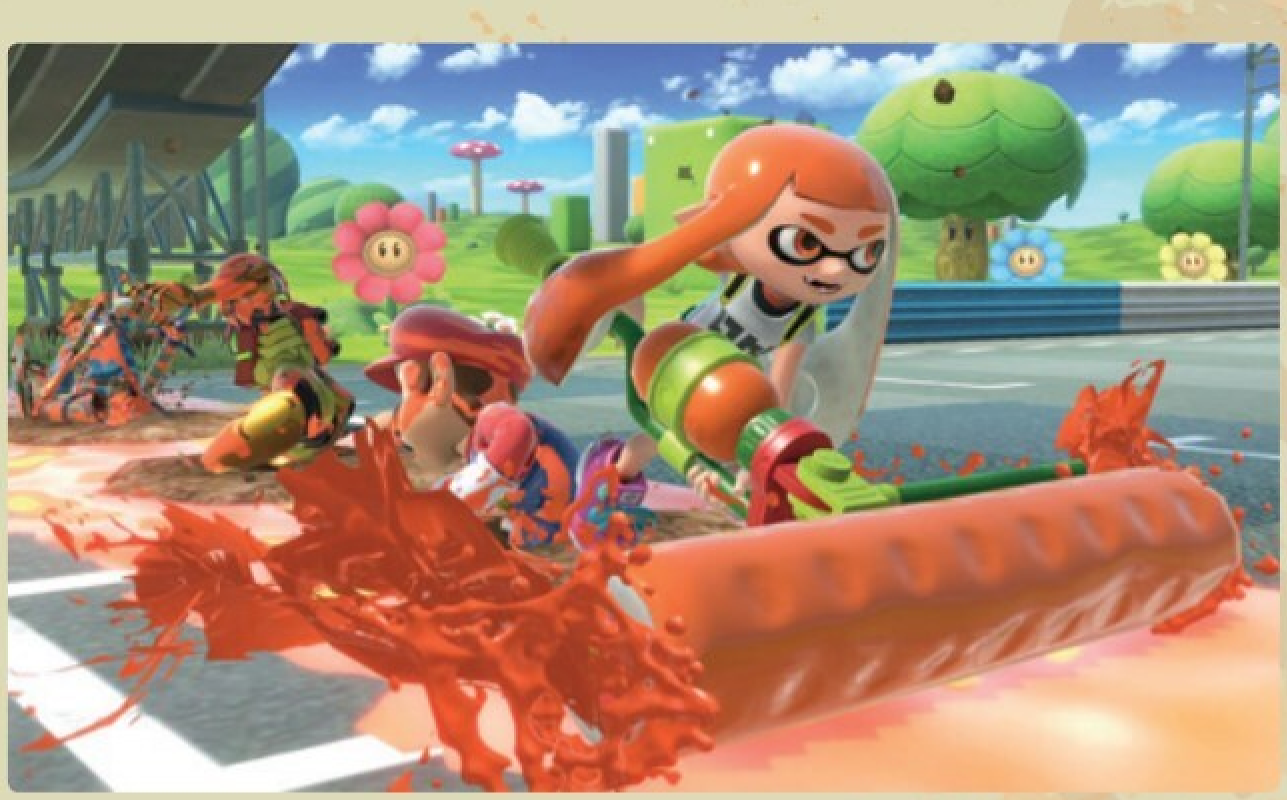
Darksiders III follows Fury as she attempts to destroy the seven deadly sins. She is capable of using magic and attacks with an intimidating, spiked whip. The game's development has been surprisingly quick, which is a little concerning, but we're excited to revisit Darksiders' world.

JUST CAUSE 4

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC **RELEASE:** December 4

The Just Cause series has always been about gameplay freedom, and this latest entry from developer Avalanche expands the possibilities by adding an unpredictable yet powerful force: Mother Nature. Tornadoes and snowstorms rearrange the landscape, posing a deadly threat to everyone and demanding players think on their feet as Rico Rodriguez, who has a more versatile grappling hook to take on the Black Hand gang. Despite the success of the series' destructive past, rearranging the sandbox is just what it needs to do to renew our excitement.

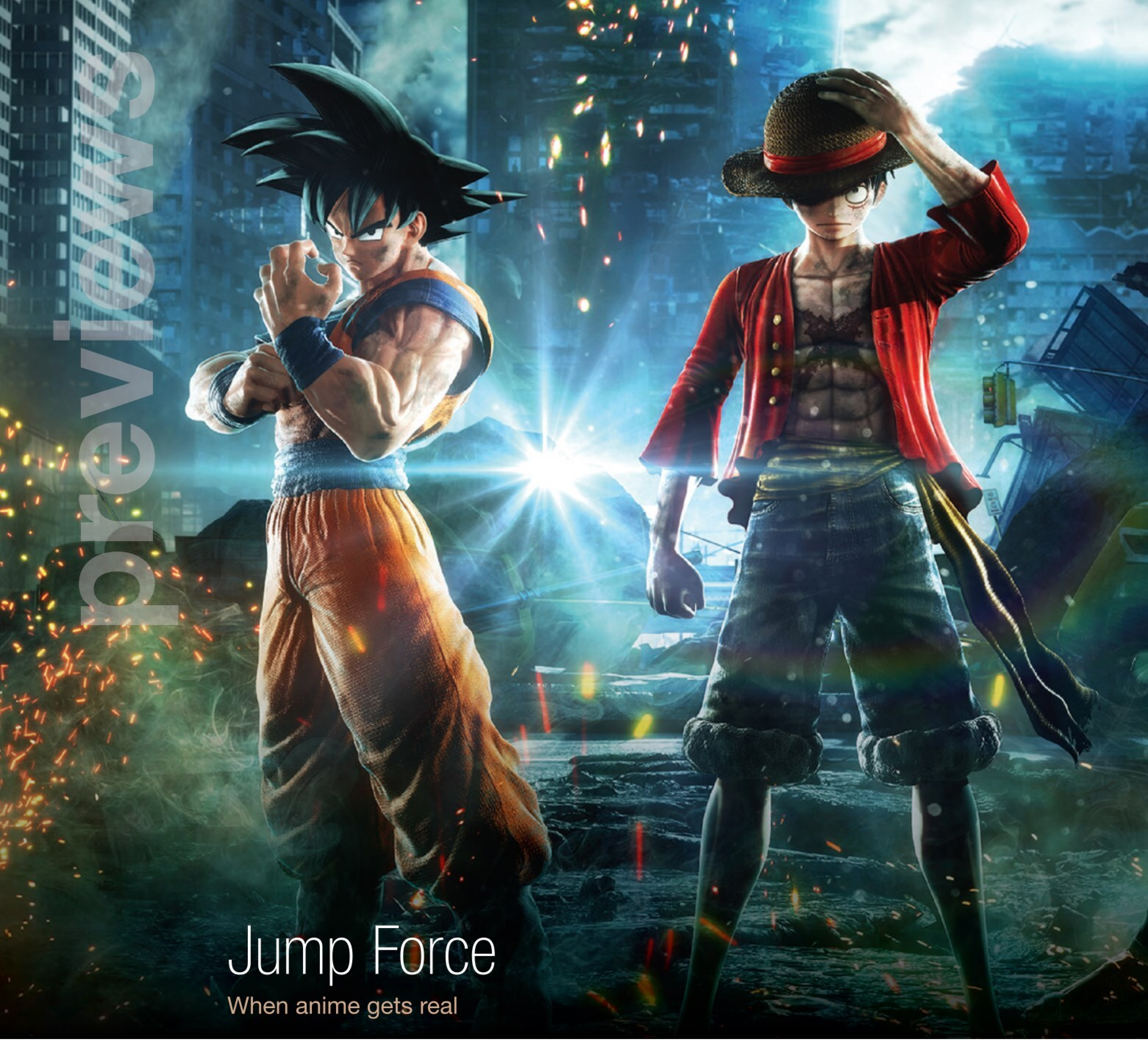




SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

PLATFORM: Switch **RELEASE:** December 7

Every time a new Super Smash Bros. game is announced, it's immediately a must-have for Nintendo's current platform. Super Smash Bros. Ultimate looks to live up to its name by presenting players with the largest fighter roster in series history. In addition to every character that's appeared in a Super Smash Bros. game to this point, Ultimate also adds Ridley from Metroid, the Splatoon Inklings, and Daisy to the roster. With a hefty list of stages, including ones inspired by Zelda: Breath of the Wild and Super Mario Odyssey, Super Smash Bros. Ultimate looks to be the most complete entry in the beloved franchise. ◆



Jump Force

When anime gets real

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Bandai Namco

» Developer
Spike Chunsoft Co., Ltd.

» Release
2019

With its latest crossover anime fighting game, Bandai Namco and longtime anime game developer Spike Chunsoft are going for something different. Rather than emulate the exact look and feel of series like Naruto, Dragon Ball Z, or One Piece, Jump Force places its latest crossover in the real world, and adopts a more realistic style to match. “This game is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the grand Shonen Jump series, and to celebrate the 50th anniversary we wanted to bring to the fans a big wow-factor,” says Bandai Namco’s Koji Nakajima. “We thought about what we could do that we had never done before and what no one had ever seen and we came up with the idea of doing this realistic approach.”

From the matches we’ve played, the graphical style definitely pulls off that wow-factor. Goku, Naruto, Luffy, and Frieza look less like cartoons with flat, bright colors and simple shading and more like they might appear in our world (though they still sport the exaggerated features and hair we’re used to). This might be a little jarring for some, but I thought these renditions were impressive and managed to stay true to the style of their original series. It’s a bold, striking look, and definitely sets Jump Force apart from the sea of anime games on the market. If Nakajima’s to be believed, the roster might set it apart, as well. “We don’t want to be too predictable with characters that everybody knows,” he says. “We do want to incorporate a little bit of a surprise wow-factor, so we want to add characters that maybe fans wouldn’t expect.” So far, however, the known roster (see sidebar) is full of safe picks.

While Jump Force might look completely different, its gameplay should be instantly familiar to anyone who’s dabbled in any of the recent Naruto or One Piece fighters. Combat take place on a large 3D field, and while the two environments we saw (a destroyed Times Square in New York and Matterhorn mountains in the Alps) were mostly flat, the characters are clearly the focus. Controls are mostly universal across fighters, allowing you to quickly figure out each character’s attacks, grabs, and special moves.

Confirmed Playable Characters

- Ichigo Kurosaki *(Bleach)*
- Rukia Kuchiki *(Bleach)*
- Sosuke Aizen *(Bleach)*
- Goku *(Dragon Ball Z)*
- Frieza *(Dragon Ball Z)*
- Naruto Uzumaki *(Naruto)*
- Sasuke Uchiha *(Naruto)*
- Monkey D. Luffy *(One Piece)*
- Roronoa Zoro *(One Piece)*

During my hands-on time, I used plenty of super moves involving seconds-long cutscenes, and I got the feeling the emphasis is more on showing off cool attacks than creating a deep, balanced fighter. Nakajima later agreed. “Rather than having a game that is more for the core gamer, like a bonafide fighting game, we want this game to be for everybody,” he explains. “We want anybody from any spectrum, whether you’re a casual or hardcore player, you can pick up the controller and play and enjoy the interactions between the characters and how they cooperate with each other.”

However, the team is trying to make sure characters aren’t too similar to each other, at least stylistically. “We are trying to achieve that by making sure their supers represent their powers, their actions, and their effects,” Nakajima says. “So we’re trying to make sure that each character is unique from each other even with a similar foundation.”

With the more casual focus, Jump Force is aiming for some hefty and compelling single-player content for fans to dive into. While past Jump titles have suffered from lackluster or nonexistent story modes, Nakajima promises something a bit more robust this time around. “We can’t really give you many details at this current time, but we do have some content in preparation that explains this story and atmosphere,” he says. “As you saw in the trailer, you have the superheroes like Goku, Luffy, Naruto, fighting against Frieza. You also saw in the background looking from afar, Death Note, Light and Ryuk, overlooking the situation. We tried to tease a little bit of that story aspect in the trailer as well, so please look forward to it.”

While the story mode is a bigger part of the game, Nakajima confirmed Bandai Namco is only recording Japanese voiceover and therefore using subtitles for releases outside of Japan.

Jump Force’s art style is impressively detailed. Hopefully, Bandai Namco can make it more than just a gorgeous tech piece. After finding critical and commercial success with Dragon Ball FighterZ, all eyes are on Bandai Namco to continue this anime fighting hot streak in the 3D arena. » **Suriel Vazquez**

FIFA 19

Looking forward to a new campaign

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(22-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Vancouver

» Release
September 28

EA Sports' FIFA 19 made its expected appearance at the EA Play E3 event this year, bringing with it news that the license-rich franchise was getting richer due to the re-acquisition of the UEFA Champions League license (as well as the Europa League). EA had the Champions League license before Konami's decade with it, putting out a pair of separate games a couple of generations ago. Since then the stature of The Champions League has only grown, becoming large enough that even soccer fans in America are engulfed in its spectacle.

For the uninitiated, the Champions League is an annual competition comprised of the top club teams from leagues around Europe that qualified by each leagues' standings from the previous season. It starts with a double round robin group stage that gives way to elimination rounds split into home and away fixtures, followed by a one-off final. The format for the Europa League – drawing from teams lower down the league tables – is similar.

The leagues are integrated into all of the game's modes, from Career mode, Ultimate Team, and more, complete with the pomp and circumstance of the competitions' anthems, various visual flair, and even specific announcers (Derek Rae and Lee Dixon). This isn't surprising at all, but one area that has exciting potential is how The Champions League may be used in the last chapter of the Alex Hunter story mode, The Journey, especially because of how it left off in FIFA 18.

The hype of the announcement may have died down since E3, but something more concrete has taken its place – extensive hands-on with the title, sampling its new gameplay elements and getting an idea of how

This isn't how the tactics are represented in the game, but you do have more options this year

the title is attempting to address some legacy issues.

The new feature that has the most promise is the resolution of 50/50 balls in space where theoretically both players have a chance to claim the ball as it sits out in the open. I experienced times where I could win those battles and gain possession of the ball unlike in past FIFAs, while other times it didn't feel vastly different. The pessimistic news is that the system is based on specific animations chosen by the game itself (as opposed to a physics-based one, for instance), so I hope the game gives us realistic outcomes in situations. The good news is I saw more correct 50/50 animations in an older E3 build, meaning the game is capable of expressing them, and it may be different from match to match or in specific instances.

One of the things I noticed were the effects of deflections or dispossessions from an outstretched foot as well as how players' bodies, when not in fully natural or ready positions, can produce varying results. My favorite was seeing my striker miss a shot while in an otherwise prime position because he wasn't ready for the incoming pass. This meant his leg swing was more awkward, resulting in a shot wide. Similar things can occur if you try and one-touch a pass while the ball is too far ahead of you or trying to take action on a ball that's behind you.

Increased accuracy – as well as power and distance – can be gained if you hit the new timed shot correctly. If you push the shot button a second time right as your foot or head contacts the ball, you'll get off a timed finish. While you'll notice it when you do it right, it's not overpowered because it doesn't guarantee a goal, and it's not easy to get the timing right in the first place. You can also use an optional real-time onscreen meter (which is also in the instant replay function) if you want to see how you're doing.

Speaking of hitting targets, last year's unexpected wayward passes still seemed to be present in my time with the game. Some were actually down to user error as I moved the left analog aiming stick early or undercooked the power, thus causing the game to choose a different passing target than I intended, but others were as mystifying as ever. FIFA 19 gameplay producer Kantcho Doskov told me it's a problem they're aware of and continuing to work on, so I certainly hope these unexpected, errant passes are fixed by launch.

As dramatic as obtaining the Champions League license is, at this time I'm not expecting it to be the thing FIFA 19 hangs its hat on. What happens next for Alex Hunter in The Journey, the changes to the gameplay, Ultimate Team, and even other features EA Sports is keeping under wraps at the moment could ultimately define the game when it comes out in late September. Then again, sometimes a magical performance on a Champions League night is just the thing the supporters remember forever.
» **Matthew Kato**

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

No Rules, No Problem In New FIFA Mode

Amidst the gameplay changes for FIFA 19, perhaps the biggest addition is one that stretches – or even ignores – the rules of the game entirely. House Rules is a mix of different exhibition game types in Kick Off mode for those who not only want to get into a game fast, but also have a different experience. Survival mode takes away a random player from the side that scores. Goals outside of the box in Long Range count as two. Headers & Volley only counts those kinds of goals. And then there's No Rules, which is a free-for-all with no cards or even offsides. Have at it.

Along with the House Rules match types is a new ID system that tracks your stats in Kick Off mode among your friends, advantage settings that let you start with a set number of goals at the beginning of the match for example, and the ability to play through set periods of The Champions League or Europa League, such as just the group stage or finals. For a franchise that already gives you so many ways to play, House Rules in Kick Off is an exciting way to spend time in FIFA.

NBA 2K19

The best basketball game works to get better

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Sports

» Developer
Visual Concepts

» Release
September 7

With all the drama of trade demands, free-agency surprises, and draft reaches, the NBA is rarely out of the headlines during the offseason. The same goes for the NBA 2K series. Seemingly every day, passionate fans still debate the perceived failures of the last edition, add ideas to hopeful wish lists, and survey social media for locker codes that unlock highly coveted MyTeam cards. Now it's time to turn our gaze to the series' next entry.

NBA 2K19 has a lot to live up to considering NBA 2K18 simultaneously became the best-selling entry in franchise history while also alienating some hardcore fans with its approach to microtransactions and server instability. While developer Visual Concepts isn't talking about those elements of the game just yet, I got my hands on the sticks for some impressions and talked with Visual Concepts about how NBA 2K19 evolves the action on the court.

The NBA 2K gameplay is generally on solid ground, but the switch to a new motion system in NBA 2K18 brought some unexpected problems. Immersion was often shattered due to excessive clipping where limbs, heads, and basketballs morphed through players' bodies. Making it worse, these rough animations weren't just limited to the high-traffic areas; I saw them in one-on-one situations on the perimeter as well.

"It was embarrassing," admits gameplay director Mike Wang. "There was a bug that we didn't find until very, very late with the collision detection. That's another thing that we're working on right now. We're spending a lot of time trying to make sure you just can't go through players and stopping them when you try to run into guys."

In my limited time with NBA 2K19, I paused to watch instant replays when bodies collided, and all the animations looked clean, with no major clipping issues. Time will tell if this applies to most or all of the animations.

Visual Concepts also has big plans for showcasing NBA players' ability to dominate games with the new Takeover system. Think of takeovers like a more nuanced take on the "On Fire" system from arcade classic NBA Jam. Players of each archetype have unique ways to exert

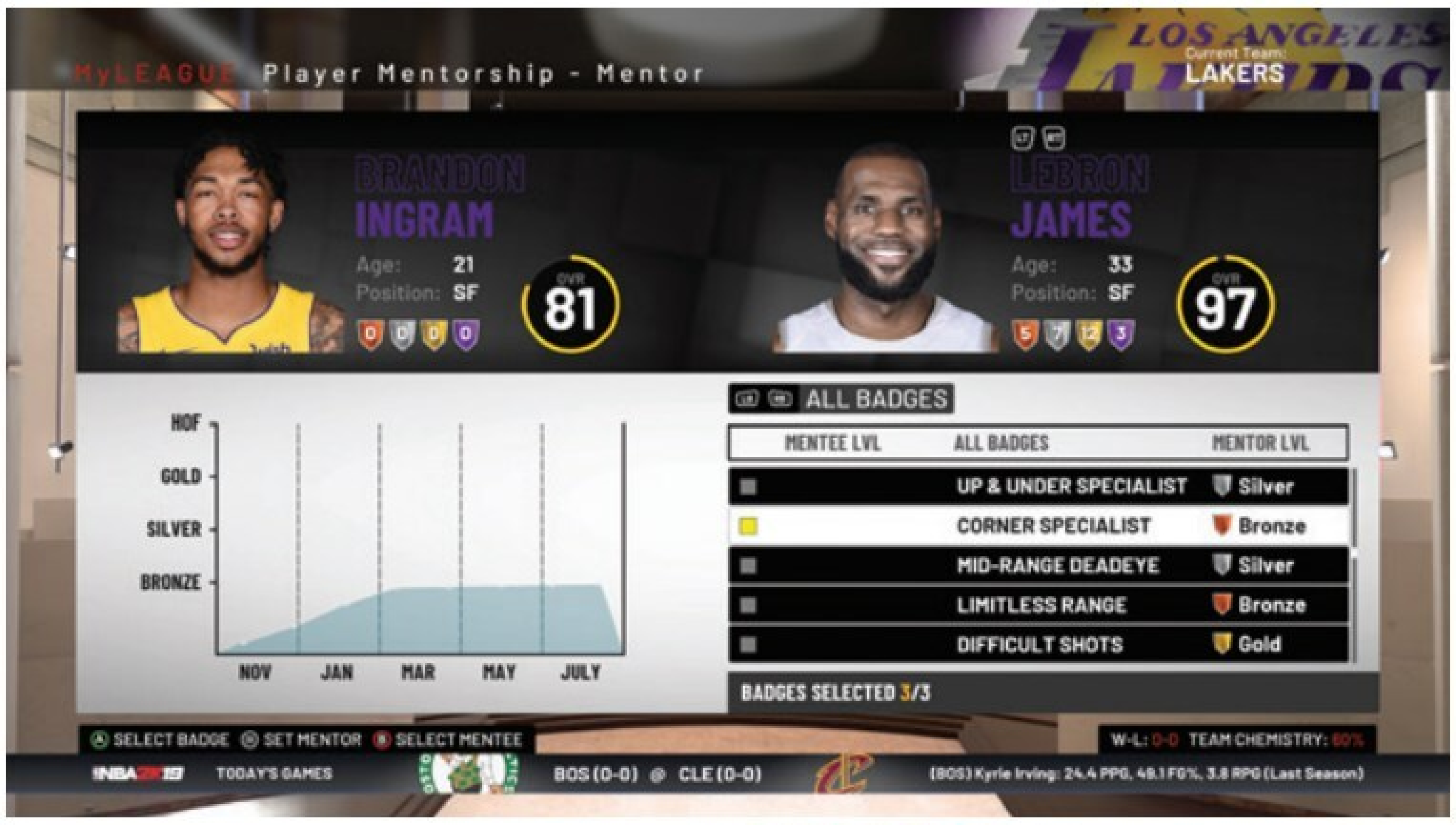
their dominance during a game. For instance, playmakers take over by setting up teammates for easy buckets, rim protectors change the trajectory of a game by locking down the paint, etc. As the player exercises his will against the opponent using his specialties, he builds up a Takeover meter. Once activated, you will see a fiery badge underneath the player on the court, which indicates the player has unlocked a new tier of special animations and badges that align with their archetype.

But beware – if your players struggle they can also develop cold streaks. These diminish gradually over time, but you can try to accelerate coming out of their funk by calling a timeout. “I like it. It’s a little meta game to think about how you play with players,” Wang says.

A rebuilt stealing system, stronger interior defense, and A.I. enhancements that up their situational awareness and help them more quickly identify players who keep spamming the same move round out the impressive-sounding gameplay changes.

Questions remain surrounding MyCareer’s story, server stability, and whether or not Visual Concepts plans to address the microtransaction complaints from last year. But strictly in terms of gameplay, NBA 2K19 sounds like it’s improving its game.

» **Matt Bertz**



BRANDON INGRAM
Age: 21
Position: SF
OVR 81

LEBRON JAMES
Age: 33
Position: SF
OVR 97

MENTEE LVL	ALL BADGES	MENTOR LVL
☐	UP & UNDER SPECIALIST	Silver
■	CORNER SPECIALIST	Bronze
☐	MID-RANGE DEADEYE	Silver
☐	LIMITLESS RANGE	Bronze
☐	DIFFICULT SHOTS	Gold

BADGES SELECTED 3/3

W-L: 0-0 TEAM CHEMISTRY: 60%

BOS (0-0) @ CLE (0-0)

(BOS) Kyrie Irving: 24.4 PPG, 48.1 FG%, 3.8 RPG (Last Season)

The Best Franchise Mode Gets Better

Franchise-mode fans always have something to look forward to with each edition of NBA 2K, and this year is no different.

Last year was Visual Concepts’ first attempt at telling a story within MyGM, and while it was rough around the edges, the concept was promising. NBA 2K19 returns with a new story about building an expansion franchise. Your duties include choosing a staff, designing uniforms, customizing the home arena, and selecting your roster. Expect to see some familiar faces from last year’s story, and Visual Concepts promises it won’t force you to make a trade this time.

MyLeague players who play in online leagues were irked by the fantasy-inspired keeper format from last year, so Visual Concepts has transitioned to support real-time drafts, real-time free-agency periods with user bids for player contracts, and even real-time staff-signing periods.

If you don’t like the trade or free-agency logic in the two franchise modes, you can now customize everything with a powerful new set of sliders that affect how A.I. teams value players, player contract demands, and skill progression/regression. A player mentor system adds a new wrinkle to progression as well. Pairing your star guard with an up-and-comer in the same position can help them earn badges more quickly than they would if they had to figure it out on their own.

NBA Live 19

Taking another run with The One

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Tiburon

» Release
September 7

It took nearly a decade, but EA finally got its NBA Live basketball franchise back on track last year. NBA Live 19 looks to continue the upward trajectory with some needed changes to the on-court action and interesting additions to The One mode.

You can't beat the best if you aren't playing your best, and EA knows it still has work to do on the gameplay front if it wants to compete with NBA 2K, which is coming off its best-selling edition of all time. "When you compared us to 2K in the past, it just wouldn't feel as smooth; we had this kind of stiffness," says creative director Connor Dougan. "With Real Player Motion and changing our player skeleton and models, we feel we have a nice jump in animation quality."

The new animation system comes hand-in-hand with reworked dribbling. Expect to see many more signature animations from star players, like LeBron James puffing out his chest and James Harden coming up the court with more relaxed body language and his standard crossovers. The overhauled triple-threat controls integrate new jab steps and pump fakes as well.

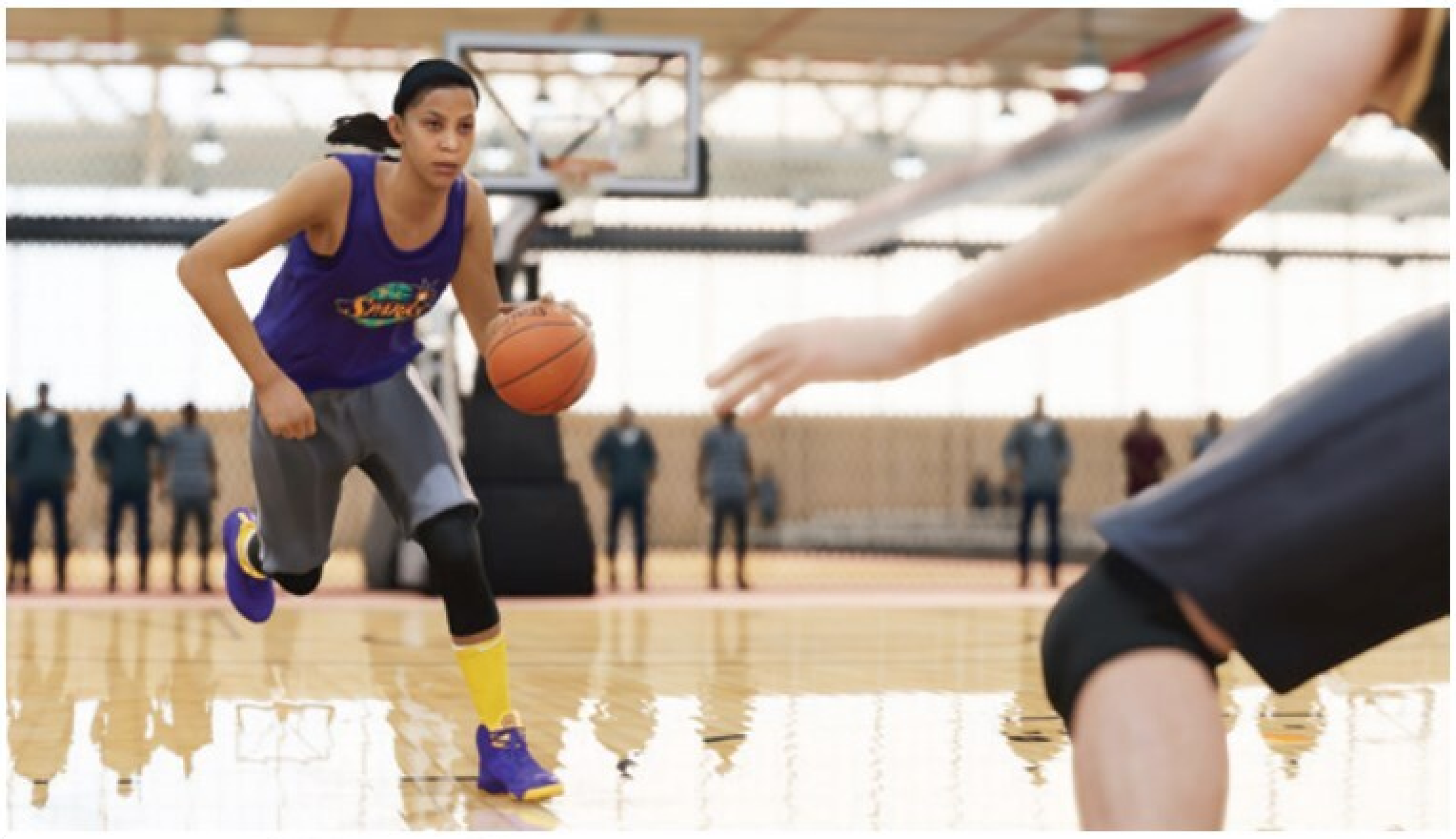
Building off last year's one-on-one gameplay, EA is bringing the cat and mouse game to off-ball interactions as well, which hopefully makes playing in space more engaging. You use the left trigger to engage in off-ball defense, which tries to slow down your mark. The offensive player has counters like V-cuts and L-cuts to break off your defending.

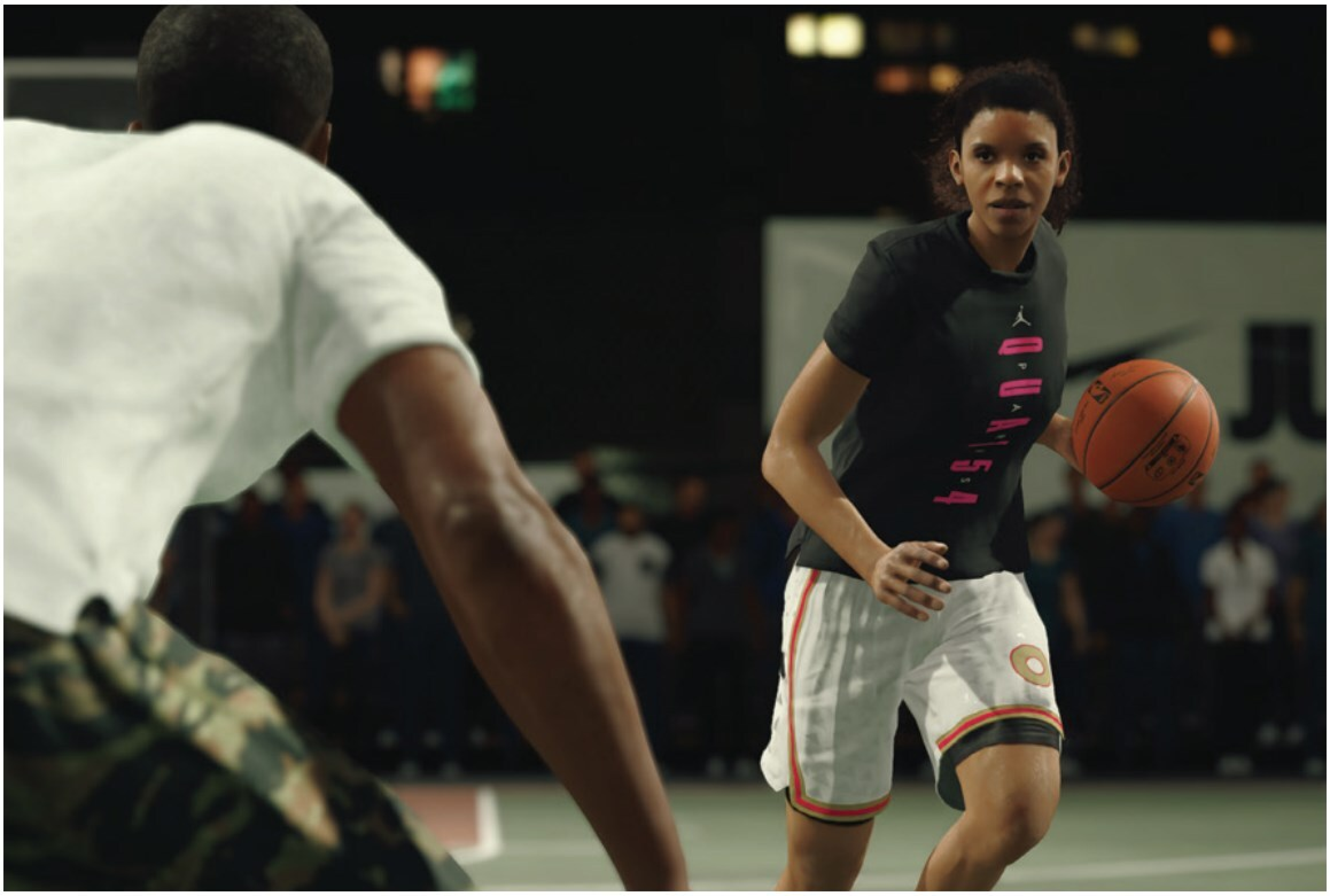
This new off-ball system should encourage better teamplay in competitive multiplayer games in The One, the signature game mode of NBA Live 19. EA realizes there were too many ball hogs in online team play last year, so it reworked the grading system to give players more points for teamplay and less for being selfish. If you take a bad shot, you will get hit with a -10. Doing it again knocks you another 20 points, and it continues to scale the punishment so people have way less incentive to try to shoot out of slumps.

Like last year, you can take your create-a-player straight to these multiplayer showdowns, build up your professional reputation in The League, or showcase your skills on streetball competition. This year's Street World Tour takes you across the globe, allowing you to recruit new players to play alongside you in the mode. The progression system is largely the same as last year, but adds a new wrinkle with the icon abilities. These abilities give you branching choices that let you have more say over what type of specialist you are.

The changes are promising, and if implemented well should put NBA Live 19 in position to continue its growth.

» Matt Bertz





She Got Next

Building off last year's WNBA integration, NBA Live 19 is the first basketball game in history to include female create-a-player. The evolution was a no-brainer according to EA Tiburon.

"We saw a huge response, not only from media sites but the community," says creative director Ryan Santos. "I think we have a lot of female ballers out there who love the sport, who watch the WNBA and NBA and hoop. It felt like once we established The One, we now have a really solid foundation for a way to play the game in a new career mode, it was the right time to create that feature with female create-a-player."

Users can use their female create-a-players for all the modes in The One but The League, as the developers didn't have time to fully integrate the WNBA into the mode. Look for that addition next year.

NASCAR Heat 3

Dialing it in

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 to 2-Player Racing (40-Player Online)

» Publisher
704Games

» Developer
Monster Games

» Release
September 7

In an odd order of events, the foundations for a good career mode for the NASCAR series was laid, not last year, but the year before in Monster Games' return to the sport in NASCAR Heat Evolution. While that career mode wasn't much, it was a start. Unfortunately, NASCAR Heat 2 stripped it out almost completely even though it added truck racing to the franchise. Now NASCAR Heat 3 looks to put everything back on track by not only adding a fantasy dirt racing tour, but also by significantly addressing the career mode expectations set back in 2016.

Players can own a racing team in each of the game's four racing series (dirt, truck, Xfinity cars, and the prime-time Monster Energy NASCAR Cup series), giving them the opportunity to oversee a racing operation that encompasses R&D as well as staff that bolster your car's performance. While you can only own one team in each of the series and it's a single-car operation, you can take contracts for existing race teams in the different series, taking over current drivers' cars or choosing a sponsor and paint scheme for your own ride.

R&D covers upgrading the engine, aero, and suspension aspects of your car, and your staff gives you bonuses in these areas depending on their expertise. These employees can be upgraded themselves, and you choose how to best assign them to the multiple chassis setups in your shop. You'll probably want to focus on horsepower for a track like Charlotte while the appropriately skilled people back in the garage get your short track car ready for future use. Everything you do for your operation(s) draws from a single pool of money, so your winnings while racing in the Xfinity Series under contract, for example, apply directly to helping the truck organization you own.

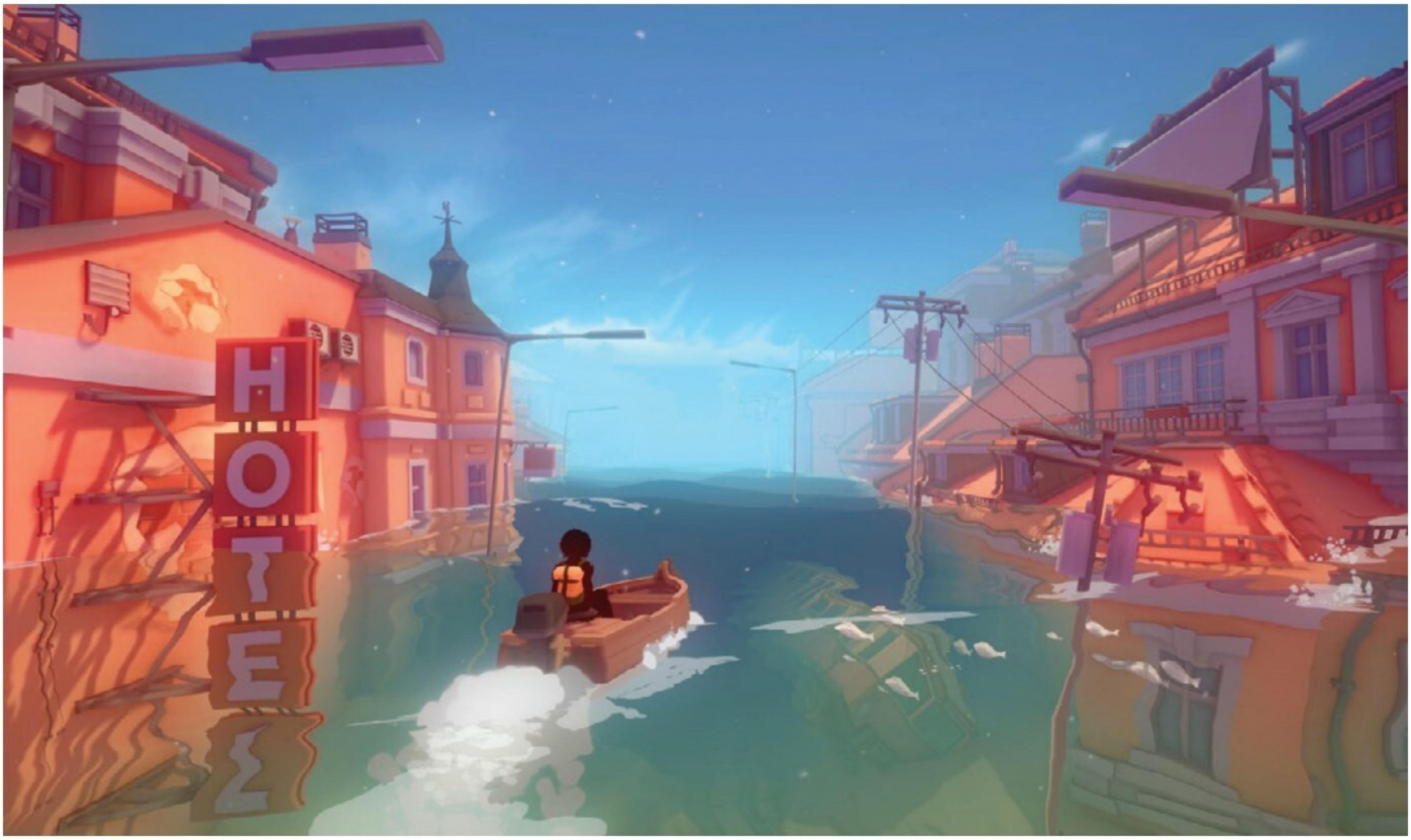
Setting your shops up right translates to better performance on the track, and the game gives you other tools as well. A dynamic racing line can be used during practice sessions, and there are nine pre-defined setups you can try (three each representing loose, neutral, and tight conditions) so you don't have to be a certified engineer to get a car you're comfortable racing. In my hands-on time, I noticed a difference in these setups, and they're a good starting point for players who want to go further and start adjusting their cars manually.

I also noticed the overall looser feel inherent in racing on the dirt tour, which is NASCAR Heat's new fictional racing series that covers nine tracks over 14 events (including the playoffs). Real ones like Eldora are included, others are fictional, and some are hybrids at locations like Bristol, incorporating parts of the real layout while adding flourishes to make the dirt racing fun.

It may have taken a little while to get here, but NASCAR Heat is building the deeper career mode fans have been asking for. This is just one of the tools developer Monster Games has given gamers to help better perform on the track; now we just have to bring it home in one piece. » **Matthew Kato**

Sea Of Solitude

Rising to the surface



» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Adventure

» Publisher
Electronic Arts

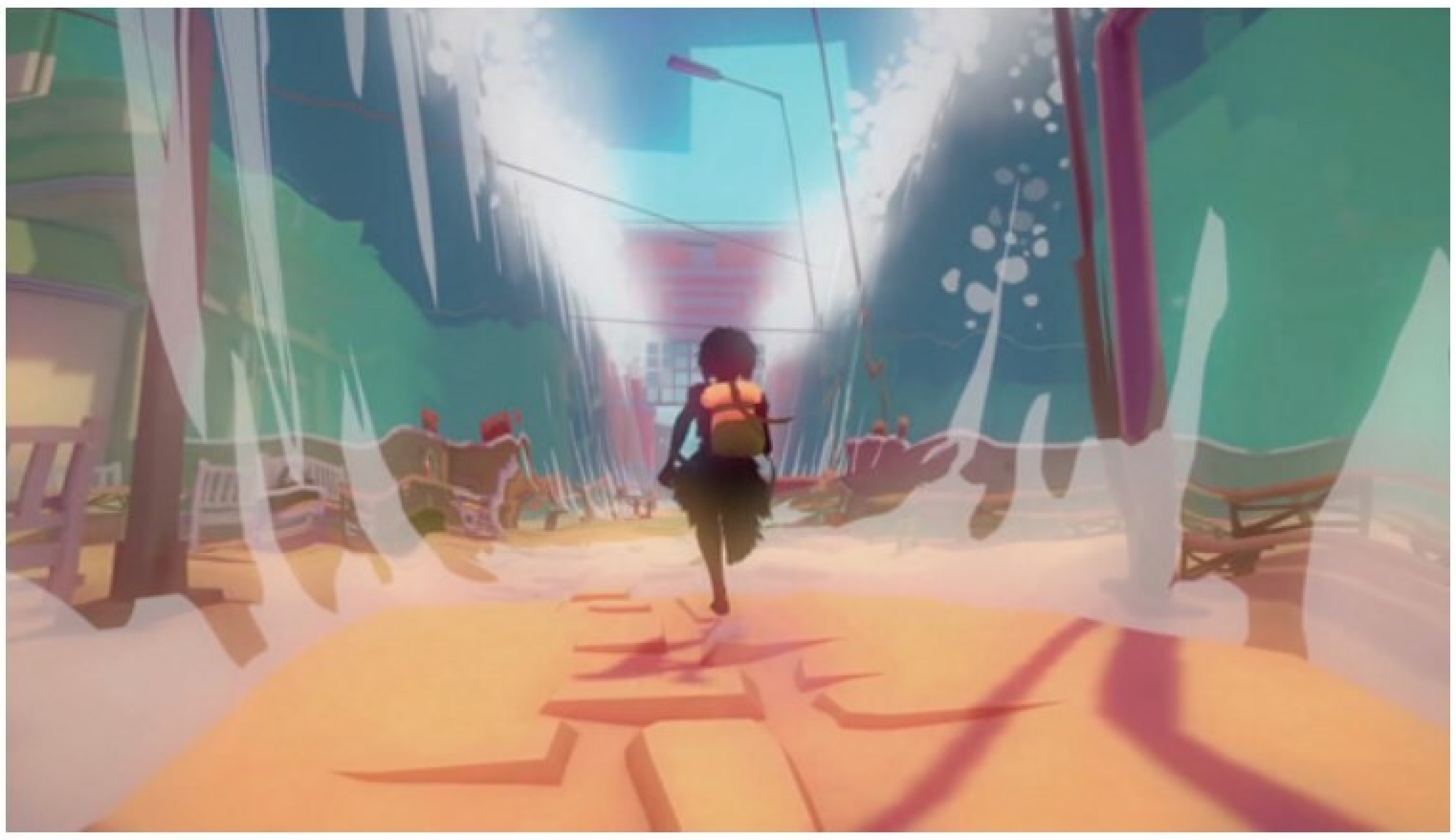
» Developer
Jo-Mei Games

» Release
2019

During its bombastic EA Play show at E3, the publisher made time to reveal something quieter and more ponderous than Star Wars and Battlefield. Sea of Solitude is the latest EA Originals title, a collection of curated games that are smaller in scope than its usual fare, and it looks to be a promising adventure.

"[Sea of Solitude will be filled] with lighthearted, funny experiences but also deeply scary moments," says Jo-Mei Games CEO Cornelia Geppert. "You play a young woman named Kay who finds herself in this flooded world and at the beginning doesn't know why she is there and how she got there at all. It is upon the player to reveal the answers behind all this questions but also reveal all the many other secrets of this world."

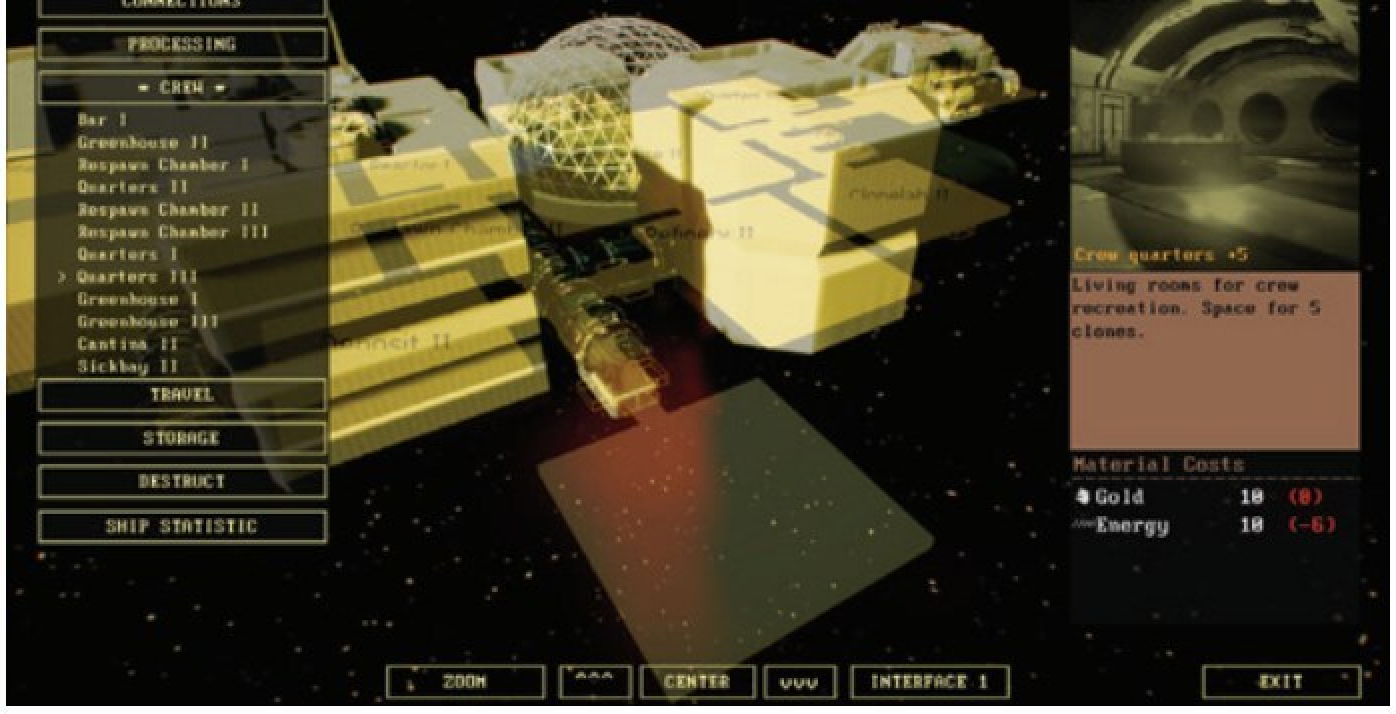
Kay's no ordinary woman. She's been transformed into some kind of feathery half-human, half-bird. During the course of Sea of Solitude, she's trying to find out how to reverse her transformation. However, she has more than a few obstacles in her path, including massive beasts. "Each [monster] will be more than interesting, even essentially important for the player throughout their journey to overcome their Sea of Solitude," Geppert says, though there seems to be bigger demons at play than just the creatures lurking in the water.



Jo-Mei Games wants to tell a profound story about mental illness, and it doesn't sound like you should expect easy answers. "Telling this story in that abstract form is what I love deeply," Geppert says. "I love movies, paintings, games who play with metaphors and symbolism so I can figure out on my own how I see what the artist tried to tell me. [Playdead's] Inside is one of the greatest examples ever in games, for me. Our whole studio spends literally entire weeks, all day long playing and analyzing and sharing ideas of what is actually going on [in Sea of Solitude]. I love it."

Jo-Mei and EA haven't specified gameplay details, except confirming exploration is part of the adventure. Will we be solving puzzles? Fighting monsters with an oar? There's a huge sense of mystery looming over Sea of Solitude. Honestly, that's enough to get us excited given just how gorgeous and diverse the world seems, and the shades of Shadow of the Colossus suggested by the monsters that populate the setting.

Sea of Solitude is still a ways off, but we're keen on getting more details about what this colorful, disturbing world holds for those brave enough to take this journey. » **Javy Gwaltney**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PROCESSING
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Greenhouse II
Respawn Chamber I
Quarters II
Respawn Chamber II
Respawn Chamber III
Quarters I
> Quarters III
Greenhouse I
Greenhouse III
Cantina II
Sickbay II
TRAVEL
STORAGE
DESTRUCT
SHIP STATISTIC
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Material Costs
Gold 10 (0)
Energy 10 (-6)
ZOOM
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CENTER
vvv
INTERFACE 1
EXIT

Living rooms for crew recreation. Space for 5 clones.

Genesis: Alpha One

Set course for space, your way

Genesis: Alpha One doesn't exactly start off on an encouraging note: Earth is done. In a desperate maneuver, several competing corporations blast scouting parties across the universe. The goal? Find an inhabitable place for humanity to rebuild. You're in charge of one of these probes, and what happens next is largely up to you and your decisions – that and the cold, random nature of the universe.

I start in a bare-bones spaceship provided by my corporate benefactor. Players can choose from several such patrons, and each has their own aesthetic styles inspired by sci-fi touchstones such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Alien*. My first order of business is to send out harvesters to scout and mine resources from nearby asteroids and planets, which are randomly generated every game. These materials can be used to build out your ship with amenities like a greenhouse, workshop, tractor beam, and more, which can then be explored in first person.

After building a cloning lab, I head to the surface of a nearby planet for some on-foot exploration. Here, the game transitions to a first-person shooter, where I scour the immediate vicinity of my landing craft for hostile alien life. The ship's turrets begin firing at some unseen entity, and I head over to see what the ruckus is about. A series of crablike aliens have approached, so I join in the fray and blast them apart with my rifle. They leave DNA samples behind, which I can use to create new hybrid clones back on my ship – if I die (and odds are, I will) I can be reborn in one of these hardier bodies.

Genesis: Alpha One's low-fi visuals add an additional layer of creepiness to what already feels like a solitary experience. My journey was all too brief, but I'm already hooked on the premise and presentation. Most of all, I'm eager to see what kinds of horrific monsters are out there, and how monstrous I can make my crew. I suspect we'll need to adapt if we want to survive. » **Jeff Cork**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Team17

» Developer
Radiation Blue

» Release
September 4

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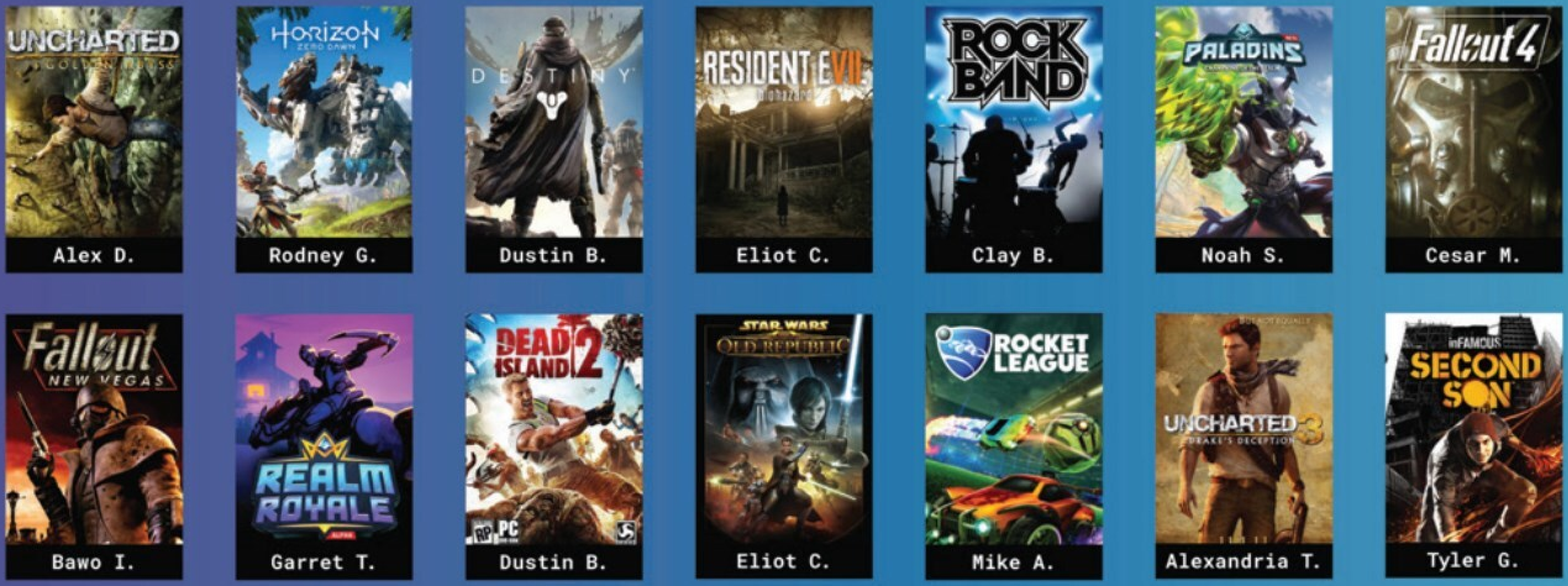
UNCHARTED
Alex D.
HORIZON ZERO DAWN
Rodney G.
DESTINY
Dustin B.
RESIDENT EVIL biohazard
Eliot C.
ROCK BAND
Clay B.
PALADINS
Noah S.
Fallout 4
Cesar M.
Fallout NEW VEGAS
Bawo I.
REALM ROYALE
Garret T.
DEAD ISLAND 2
Dustin B.
STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC
Eliot C.
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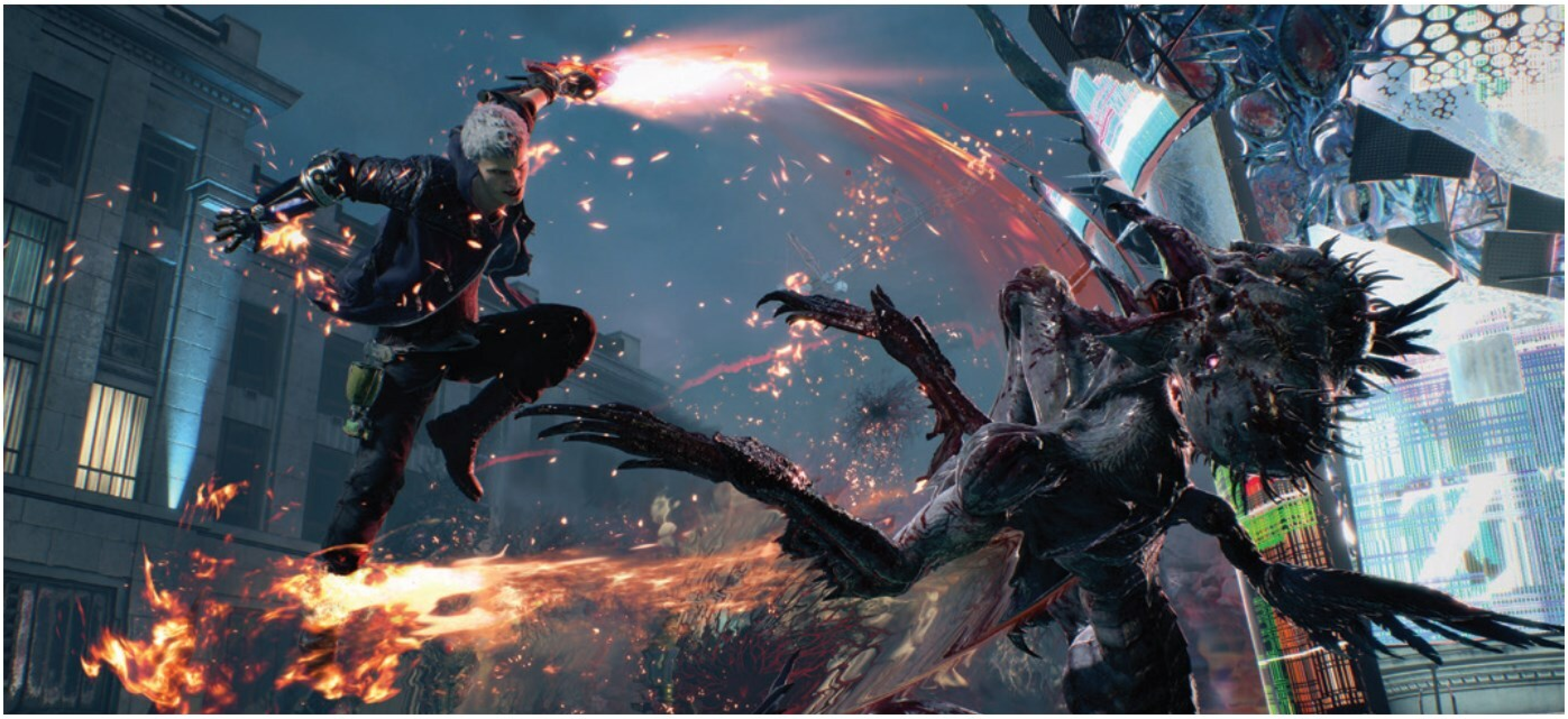

Devil May Cry 5

Still stylish after all these years

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
Spring

When Capcom and Ninja Theory released the reboot of Devil May Cry in 2013, it seemed to establish a new trajectory for Dante, Vergil, and the rest of the DMC universe. That's the whole point of a reboot. However, after letting the franchise rest for a few years, Capcom has decided to return to familiar territory. The reveal of Devil May Cry 5 at this year's E3 was surprising in many ways, but the big revelation was how Capcom is sidestepping the reboot and picking up the story where Devil May Cry 4 left off 10 years ago.

The initial unveiling was light on specifics, with only a handful of details about DMC 5's gameplay and premise. It is set several years after DMC 4, and features Nero running a mobile demon-hunting agency out of a van. Nero is once again the central focus of the story, but his signature demonic arm (the Devil Bringer) is gone, replaced by a mechanical prosthetic (the Devil Breaker). The reveal trailer doesn't show Nero in his Devil Trigger form, but the theme song accompanying the footage is called "Devil Trigger," so it's probably safe to assume that mechanic is returning.

Nero engages in fluid, high-flying action as he battles demons that are bigger than ever. He's equipped with his classic gun-and-sword combo (Blue Rose and Red Queen, respectively), but his arsenal has expanded. His new partner Nico is an enthusiastic tinkerer who takes pride in making tweaks and adjustments to Nero's cybernetic arm in the field. She outfits the Devil Breaker with a variety of abilities that players need to equip, like adding an electrical charge or using it like a rocket.

While Capcom has only shown combat footage of Nero so far, the company confirms that DMC 5 has three playable characters. Nero and Dante are two of them, but the third is more mysterious. Promotional art prominently features an unknown (and apparently unarmed) figure with dark hair walking alongside Nero and Dante. That final figure is the third playable hero, but who he is and how he fights remain unknown for the moment.

Another big question mark is whether or not Vergil plays a role. Vergil is a fan-favorite character famous for his katana skills, and the dynamic between him and Dante has become a major component of the franchise. Just because Vergil is technically dead at this point in the timeline doesn't necessarily mean he won't make an appearance – especially since his familial connections to Dante and Nero are not likely to be ignored in the story.

Capcom still has plenty of blanks to fill in before DMC 5's release next spring. For a franchise that has consistently pushed the limits of the phrase "over-the-top," what new doors does current technology open? We don't have the answer to that question yet, but that isn't stopping us from looking forward to the next installment in the series that defined stylish action. » **Joe Juba**

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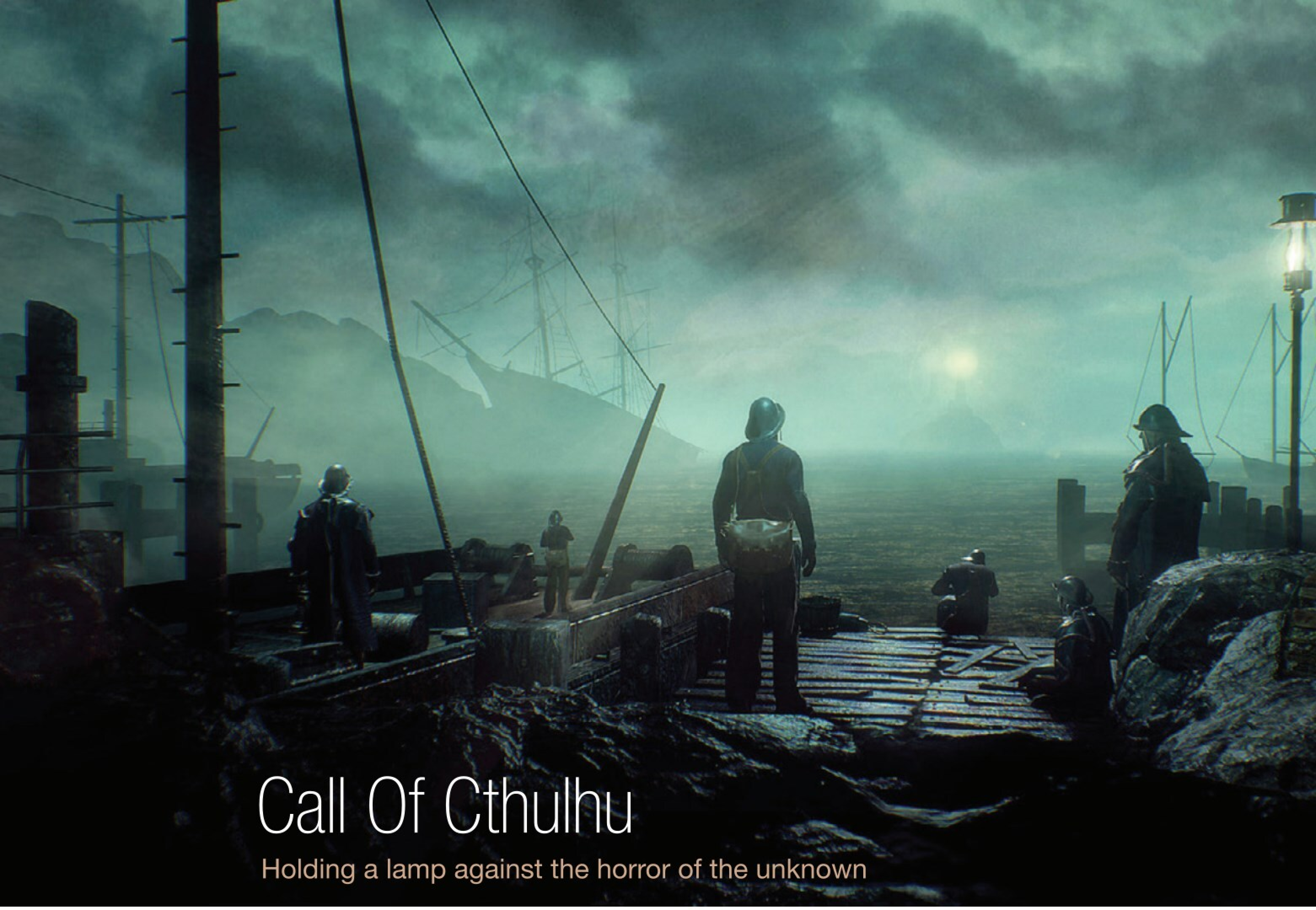

Call Of Cthulhu

Holding a lamp against the horror of the unknown

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Focus Home Interactive

» **Developer**
Cyanide Studio

» **Release**
Fall

H.P. Lovecraft has been a massive influence on horror games over the years, all the way from 1992's seminal survival-horror title Alone in the Dark to the gruesome, twisted Victorian trappings of Bloodborne and beyond. In spite of all that influence, explicit adaptations of Lovecraft's material have rarely been well-received outside of the cult favorite Call of Cthulu: Dark Corners of the Earth.

The simply titled Call of Cthulhu, developed by Cyanide studios, is hoping to change that. Call of Cthulhu is based on both Lovecraft's work and the famous pen-and-paper RPG. It takes place in 1924 with players stepping into the waterlogged boots of investigator Edward Pierce. Pierce is sent to an isolated gothic island called Darkwater to investigate the tragic death of an affluent family. But there's much more than meets the eye with this case.

I recently saw a few minutes of gameplay from Cyanide's take on Lovecraft and came away both impressed and concerned about the game's executions of its lofty ambitions. The demo I watched had Pierce searching for clues about the deaths of the Hawkins' family. The environment and whole vibe of the demo successfully captured the creepy world of Lovecraft. An eerie blue light cast over charred walls immediately set a state of unease, as did creepy portraits of naked, writhing figures.

According to Cyanide, Pierce has a sanity gauge that will be affected by your choices and the discoveries you make during your investigation. As the game goes on, Pierce suffers from hallucinations that emerge based on your decisions throughout the game. I didn't see much of these during our demo, which had Pierce finding inaccurate police reports and looking for things in shadowy corners, but it does sound promising and fits with the thematic tapestry of insanity that Lovecraft's works form.

I liked a good deal of what I saw during my demo, particularly with how Cyanide has constructed a setting that feels remarkably faithful to Lovecraft's works. However, a lot of the demo just didn't look like it was interesting to play, with Pierce walking around a manor and narrating to himself. A part of the dullness could be chalked up to the game's walking simulator exploration being unfriendly to demo and it's much more interesting to actually play. It could also be that given the subtle, ambitious structure of the game (meant to build, almost like a horrifying crescendo), it just doesn't showcase well in small segments.

Despite the swath of great games influenced by Lovecraft (like Darkest Dungeon), it's been years since a fantastic official Cthulhu game hit. We hope the greater, promising bits Cyanide showcased outweigh our concerns when the final version stalks into our minds like some awful cosmic phantom this fall. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Horrors galore await you in this mansion. Be careful

Deathgarden

The hunt is on

One overpowered hunter. Five scrappy runners. One arena that's different every time. These are the ingredients infusing Behaviour Digital's (Dead by Daylight) upcoming asymmetric title.

The quick and agile runners have abilities and options that help them escape the hunter's gaze, like caltrops. Runners play from a third-person perspective, and unlike some other titles, they actually can't kill the hunter at all – they must capture various control points, collect resources, and ultimately escape. The arena is procedurally generated with unpredictable weather and obstacles, so you can't plan ahead.

The hunter plays from a first-person perspective, and is slower than the runners, but possesses incredible power. Tracking and downing runners with heavy ordnance is the name of the game, and fallen hunters are placed at the "bloodpost." The hunter can only execute captured runners at the bloodpost, which permanently removes them from the match – but savvy and adventurous runners can also save allies that are stuck at the execution site. If the hunter executes three runners, the game is over.

Deathgarden is an elaborate dance of cat-and-mouse with some ambitious ideas for asymmetric games, and we're interested to see more when it enters early access this month.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
6-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Behaviour Digital

» **Developer**
Behaviour Digital

» **Release**
August (Early Access)

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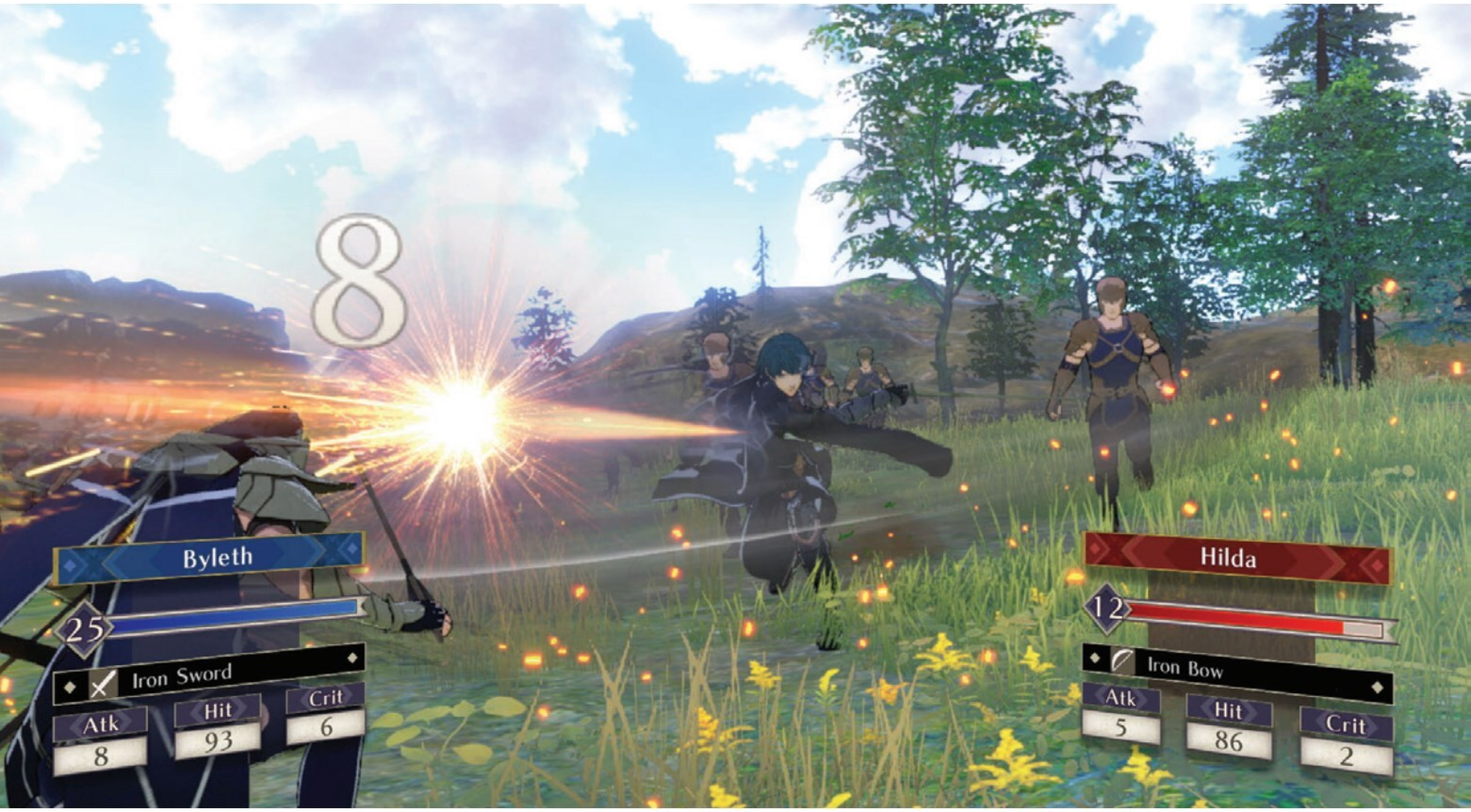
Fire Emblem: Three Houses

Back to the big screen



» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

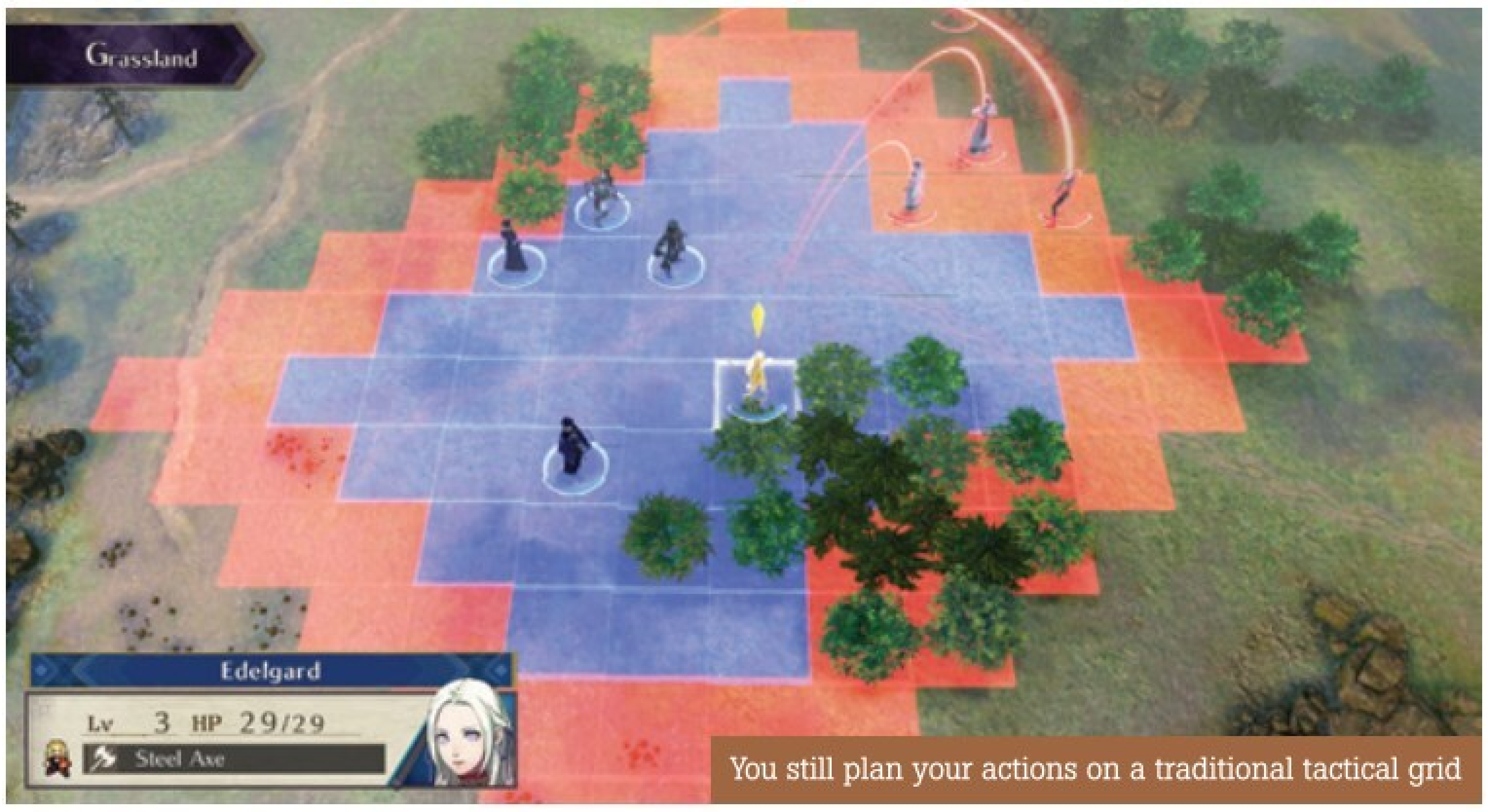
» **Developer**
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
Spring

A Fire Emblem game hasn't graced the home console since 2007's Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn on the Wii, but Intelligent Systems is bringing what has been relegated to the handheld back to a primary platform. The tactical RPG series gets a new story, new characters, and a new location to play in, with what could be the most ambitious title yet for the relationship-centric franchise.

The world of Fódlan sets the stage for the tale, as the powerful Church of Seiros exerts maximum control over the land and people. The story hinges on four main characters: Byleth, Edelhard, Dimitri, and Claude (with the key main character protagonist being Byleth). As in previous titles, building relationships with other characters is important, though we don't know to what extent it will improve your performance both on and off the battlefield. If previous games are any indicator, such bonds will create impressive perks and opportunities to stomp opposing forces into the ground.

Images from the game showcase a traditional Fire Emblem tactical battlefield, with player units squaring off with weapons on a location-variable grid. New to Fire: Emblem Three Houses, however, are supporting troops – transforming what was typically a simple battle of powerful characters into full-fledged warfare with armies represented on the field. While it doesn't look like each bowman, footman, or cavalry unit will battle "directly," they look to offer strategic bonuses and opportunities to your standard roster of heroes, misfits, and wizards. These units also make the field of play more like an actual battleground than the simple unit-to-unit engagements of past titles.



You still plan your actions on a traditional tactical grid

Off the battleground, players visit towns, castles, villages and the like, and can converse with NPCs and (possibly) your other characters and units, if other titles in the franchise are a basis to go on.

Weapon durability for items looks to also have returned, so you may need to conserve your best weapons for critical attacks against the strongest units. A few indicators from E3 screens also suggest there are more options in combat than having a singular attack or magic option, but we'll need to see more to know how it all plays out.

Fire Emblem: Three Houses is still far away, but we're excited to start forging bonds, building heroes, and engaging in tactical combat when it arrives next year. » **Daniel Tack**

A Plague Tale: Innocence

A bubonic rhapsody

A Plague Tale has one simple goal: to be the road trip of your nightmares. Set during The Black Death, it follows the trials and tribulations of siblings Amicia and Hugo as they journey across 14th century France, trying to escape the bubonic plague. While A Plague Tale obviously draws a great deal of inspiration from European history, the gameplay demo looked like something straight out of *Dante's Inferno*. Bodies are stacked on bodies in every direction, with rats clambering over or gnawing on them. If Amicia and Hugo aren't careful, they'll join the pile.

A straightforward adventure, A Plague Tale forces you to use your wits to survive both the plague and the soldiers who are hunting you. You're only armed with a few gadgets, but they're nifty ones. For example, have a soldier hunting you through the labyrinth of bodies? Hurling a rock at his lamp will cause him to drop it and extinguish the flames. Rats follow in the wake of darkness, swarming and chewing on him until his body disappears and his wails of pain cease.

The spectacular lighting system also gives this gothic adventure a unique look over its peers as flames cast an eerie light over mud-stained stone and the horror-stricken faces of corpses in the dirt. A sunset I saw also made the entire world look beautiful in spite of its grim atmosphere.

While we didn't get to see much more than a demonstration of its mechanics, A Plague Tale has loads of potential as both a grim adventure through a horrific hellscape as well as an emotionally resonant tale about brother and sister. From my time, Amicia and Hugo seem human, fallible, and care deeply for one another. I'm curious to see how this unique and disturbing jaunt through Europe pans out once it hits next year. » **Javy Gwaltney**

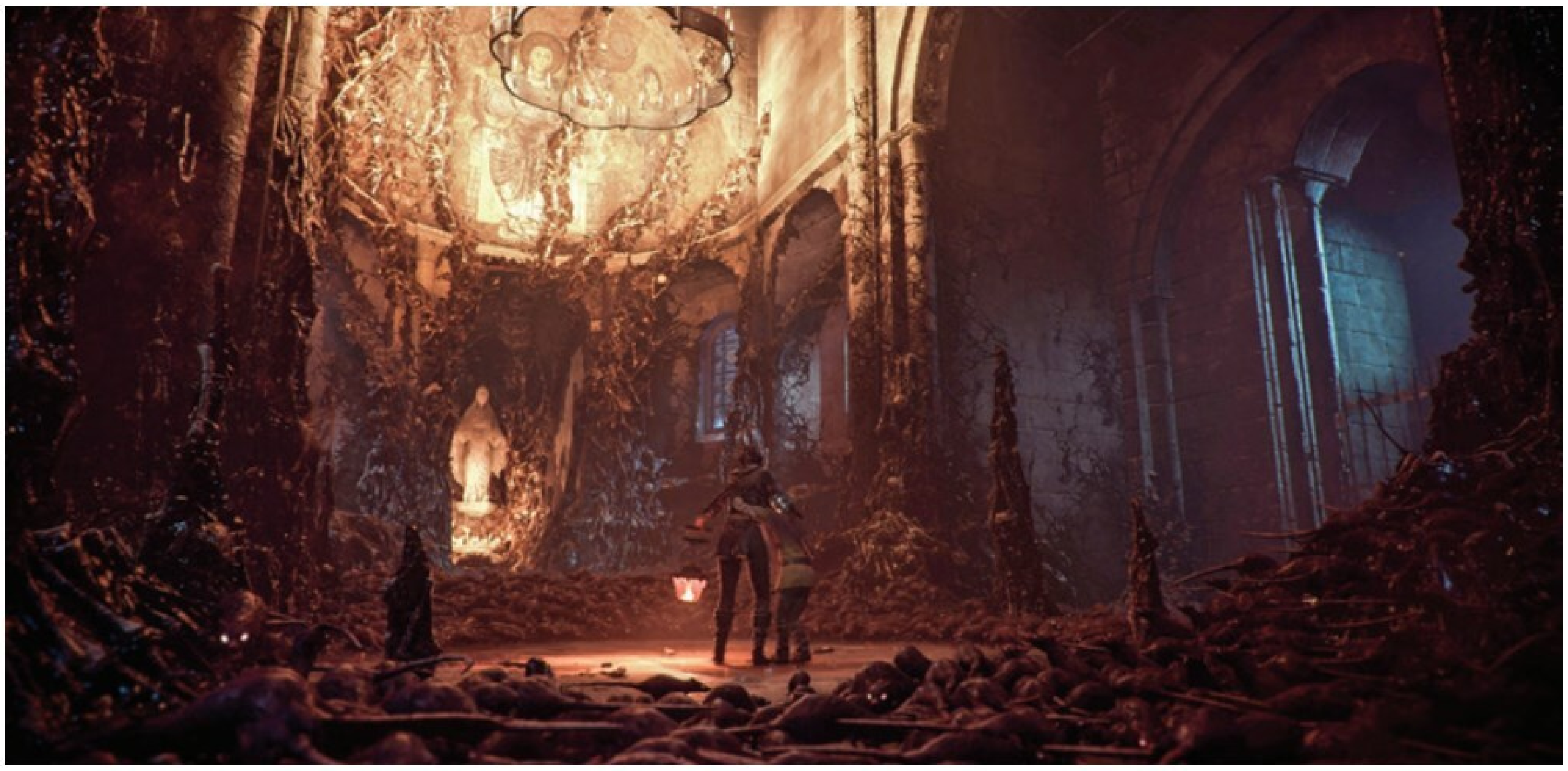
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Adventure

» **Publisher**
Focus Home Interactive

» **Developer**
Asobo Studio

» **Release**
2019



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reviews

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

84 Fortnite

Epic Games' cooperative monster-mashing game is significantly bolstered by an accessible, fun, constantly shifting battle royale experience. In Fortnite, the next adventure is only one drop out of the battle bus away, with dynamic gameplay catering to the single scrappy player or a full squad of friends.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Ligma.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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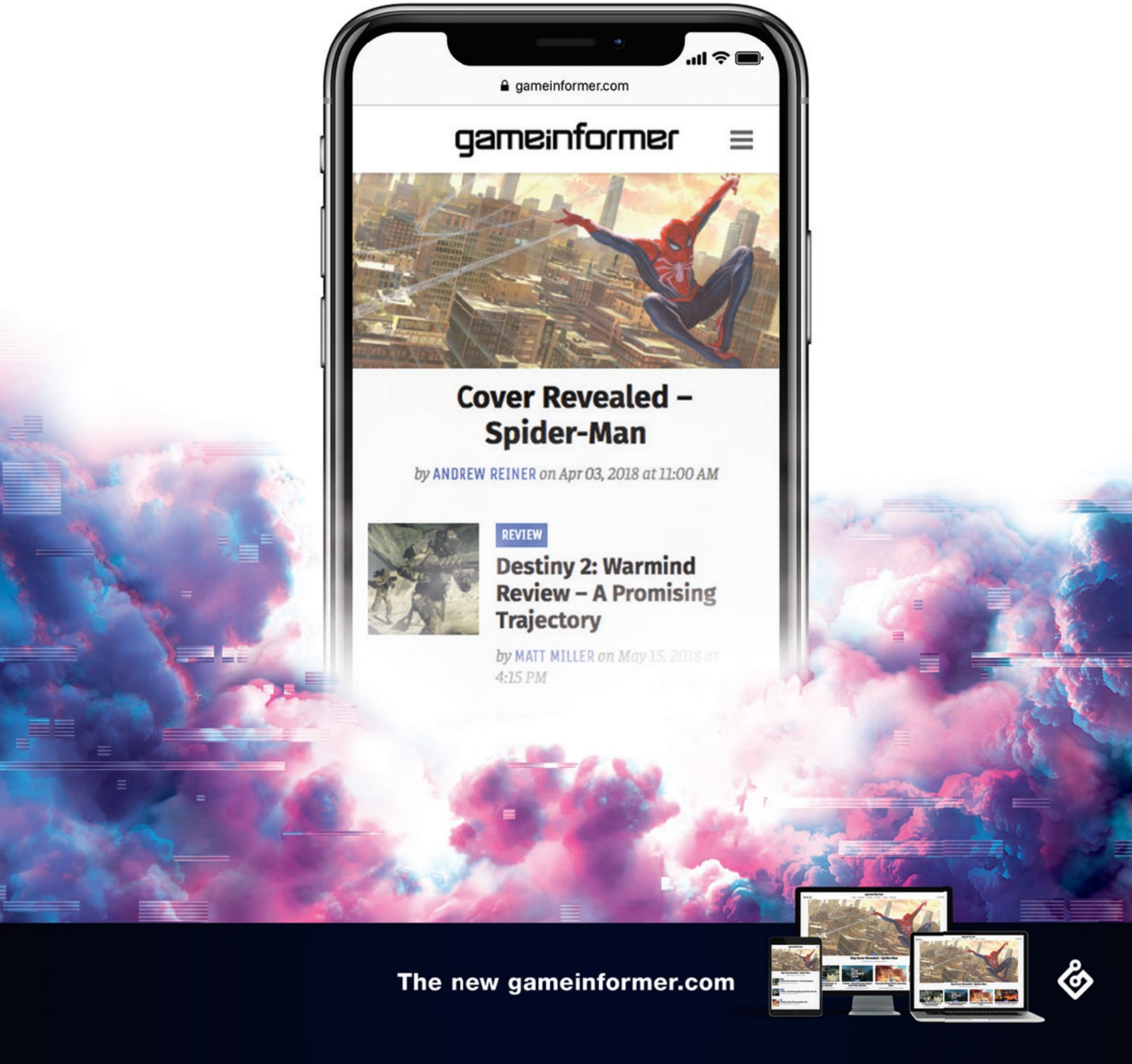

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Cover Revealed – Spider-Man

by ANDREW REINER on Apr 03, 2018 at 11:00 AM

REVIEW

Destiny 2: Warmind Review – A Promising Trajectory

by MATT MILLER on May 15, 2018 at 4:15 PM

The new gameinformer.com

Fortnite

An epic epoch

9.5

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer GOLD

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Epic Games **Developer** Epic Games **Release** July 2017 (Save the World), September 2017 (Fortnite Battle Royale) **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC
Mac • iOS

» Concept
Take on an endless swarm of enemy husks in a cooperative defensive game, or battle against a legion of other players to be the last person standing in a battle royale

» Graphics
Stylish and colorful visuals catch the eye and direct the flow of action

» Sound
Sound is critical for detecting other players nearby, but none of the effects stand out as anything special

» Playability
Incredibly easy to pick up and play, with those seeking to accumulate many wins mastering the art of frenetic building

» Entertainment
Playable, watchable, understandable, and enjoyable by just about anyone with a pulse, Fortnite is an absolute blast

» Replay Value
High

Occasionally, a game comes along that takes off in a way that defies all expectations, breaking into the mainstream consciousness, enveloping pop culture and audiences worldwide. Fortnite is one of those experiences. With two disparate game options, a plethora of llamas, and unlimited replayability, Epic Games is leading the charge in an era that promises to redefine what it means to be a live-service game. While both modes are enjoyable solo, they are far better with friends.

The first game mode, Save the World, is a cooperative experience that tasks players with defending various points and structures via building, blasting, and traps. A variety of husk (zombie) enemies keep spawning and trying to take down your defenses, but a wide array of weaponry and savvy crafting can save the day. Save the World is fun but ultimately repetitive, with many of the hooks revolving around a massive skill tree, busting open llamas to unlock new characters and weapon recipes, and collecting resources. The endless mass of foes and the drip unlock system are enticing at first, but ultimately can feel like a chore and is unsatisfying.

The standard premise of each stage is fun: Build a giant base from raw materials, *Home Alone* the hell out of it with traps, and sit back and pop off a ton of headshots on the unrelenting swarm. Depending on your tolerance for horde modes and home defense, Save the World mode might be perfect for you, especially if you'd rather play with other players instead of against them. Depending on your mood, you can take on more relaxing missions, or put yourself up against some heavy husks, so you can choose your own level of engagement with the terrible tide.

The real star of the show is Fortnite Battle Royale and its sub-modes. The core concept is immediately understandable and offers intense replayability. Dropping out of the party bus, you rocket to the ground, scramble to be first to a weapon among other players, and take out the early competition before they can take out you. You can't respawn after death, so it's one and done. However, you can immediately hop right into another match if you die, an aspect that greatly removes some of the sting of defeat.

Should you survive the furtive opening moments, the middle segment of survival and scavenging tasks you with moving from landmark to landmark, looking for weapons, shields, and health to get you through to the next encounter. The walls begin to close in as the storm pushes players together, reducing the field of play over time and forcing action. If you run into another player, the battle is often decided in mere moments, so paying attention to sound and environmental clues (like discarded weapons,

broken down structures, or crudely constructed defenses) is paramount. This point of the game is intense and action-packed as you battle for prime loot and seek a spot in the shrinking circle. The final stage of each match (assuming you survive that long) is an often-frenzied combination of building and explosions as powerful guns shred rapidly constructed defenses. Sometimes the best play is just to hide in a bush and let everyone else fight it out, and then clean house. You may get to enjoy a sweet victory rush for being the last person standing or be sent unceremoniously packing by a staircase-jumping tactical shotgun to the face – either way, the adrenaline of every game carries over to the next match, again and again.

The sheer replayability of Fortnite Battle Royale is one of its greatest strengths. Despite there only being one map, nothing ever plays out the same from game to game. Your learned experience about chest spawns, terrain, and weapon functionality carries over, but how these aspects intersect is fresh every time. Maybe you land with 10 other players in the middle of a house, forcing you to decide whether to book it to the next area or go Rambo, hoping to reap the rewards of the lone survivor of a grim melee. Maybe you get a great weapon right away, but wander into the middle of a skirmish between two snipers. Like Dota 2 or League of Legends, despite the single primary playspace, the rest of the variables mean that one map is more than enough.

Combine this with the fact that the landscape of the map is continuing to change with every season and you have a winning recipe, one rooted in core gameplay aspects but always adding new quirks and perks. Whether it's a thermal scope, a ridable golf cart, or turning a swamp into a desert, the never-ending new additions to Fortnite set it far above the curve with constant, consistent updates. Bring a team along and play in squads to experience new tactics and thrills, like building walls around downed enemies or allies to prevent others from reaching them.

New weapons, gadgets, and map locales are not the only things that are always changing. In a 50v50 all out war mode or an actual battle against Thanos from the Marvel universe, you always have a new limited-time experience to try out if you're suffering from fatigue with the standard brawl. As palate cleansers and diversions, these alternative modes give you something to do after a frustrating loss, with a new playgroup, or when you're just messing around.

Fortnite is an ever-shifting entity, but strong footing has solidified it as a verified phenomenon with fast, fun gameplay and ubiquitous reach. Anyone can play it and have a great time, and although Save the World might get grindy and shotgun climb-and-dives might get a little tiresome, there's real magic here along with the promise of more in the months and years to come.

» **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PC version of Fortnite. It is also available on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Mac, and iOS

Chasm

Lagging behind greatness

7.5

PS4 • Vita • PC

» Concept
A Metroid-style fantasy adventure composed of procedurally generated areas

» Graphics
Chasm's retro pixel art looks fantastic, and features a vibrant range of environments and fearsome enemies

» Sound
The soundtrack is subdued, but I never got tired of the atmospheric background noise

» Playability
Platforming sequences offer a good challenge and the combat requires deliberate precision, but the controls aren't always responsive

» Entertainment
Chasm features a lot of Metroid goodness, but the randomness makes levels range from triumphant to tedious

» Replay Value
Moderate

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Bit Kid, Inc. **Developer** Bit Kid, Inc. **Release** July 31 **Rating** E10+

A decade ago, Metroid fans were starving for exploration-based action/platformers. These days, that drought is over. Many developers are taking cues from Nintendo's sci-fi classic, and Bit Kid is one of them. This studio's take on the formula features a young knight on a journey to rescue a wayward mining town from the imposing creatures that occupy its caverns. Chasm features all of the Metroid hallmarks: creative upgrades, fearsome enemies, and gorgeous backdrops. Unfortunately, its twisting labyrinths feel randomly slapped together – which they are.

When you first set foot in this remote mountain town, it appears to be abandoned. The townsfolk have been kidnapped by monsters and locked away in a dangerous tangle of underground mines. You explore the depths to rescue the citizens, earning unique tools that allow you to overcome obstacles as you delve into haunted burial chambers and moss-covered underground waterways. Some of these upgrades are mundane, such as the lantern that lets you see in the dark. Others, like the climbing gear that lets you wall-jump up vertical shafts, are fun to use and open up a variety of new areas to explore.

Combat is straightforward, and each cavern is teeming with unique monsters like rock golems, mining ghosts, and scythe-wielding rats. Chasm's attack-and-dodge battles are intuitive, and getting a handle on most creatures' attack patterns is easy. However, your equipment can make a big difference during these encounters, and new weapon drops are frustratingly few and far between. I battled for every inch through two whole zones before I finally gained a new piece of armor that turned a previously unpassable hallway into a breeze.

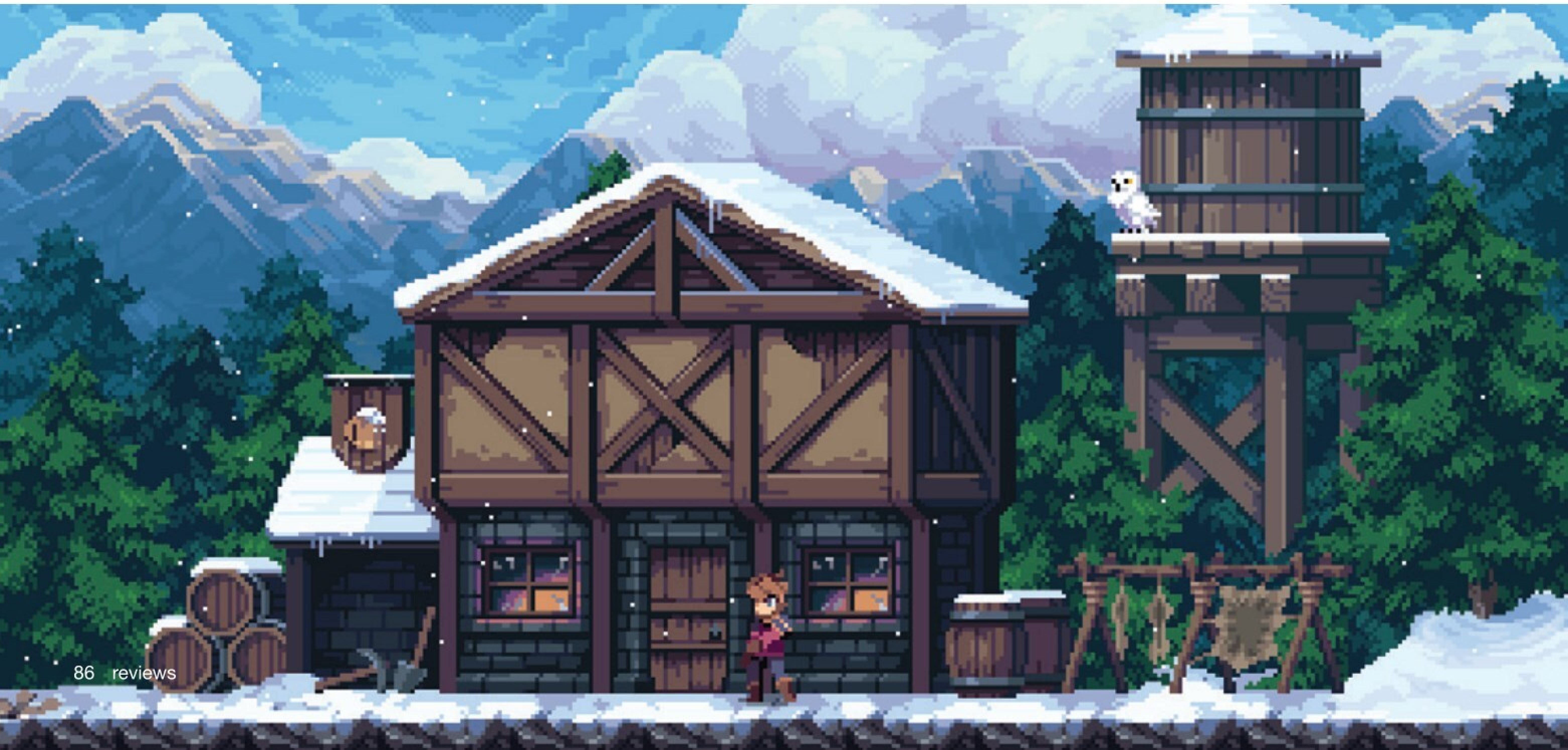
These chasms are full of more than old mining equipment and ghouls, and you encounter plenty of townsfolk looking for a way out. Saving these civilians restores the above-ground town and gives you access to new stores like the blacksmith or the alchemist. Rescuing these people was nearly as rewarding as finding a new piece of gear, and I loved seeing my town slowly come back to life.

Aside from battling monsters, Chasm features a number of exciting, handcrafted platforming sequences, and I held my breath as I white-knuckled my way across a series of spike traps or jumped across crumbling platforms above a poison-filled pit. Memorable sequences like these make Chasm's moment-to-moment action compelling, but that occasional excitement doesn't hold the entire package together.

In an effort to create an endlessly repayable game, Bit Kid designed Chasm as a procedurally generated experience. When you begin, the entire network of caves is randomly stitched together to provide a unique playthrough. The longer you play, the more issues stem from this lack of curated content. For example, save points are often spaced too far apart. The random nature also kills the pacing; I went for one long stretch without finding any upgrades and then hit three in quick succession. This approach to design can keep things fresh in games designed for quick runs, but Chasm doesn't operate that way. One playthrough takes about 12 hours, which means you're stuck with the same dull, random configurations that entire time.

I was happy to find new equipment and other treasures, but these caves don't have enough hidden secrets to make scouring them interesting. You also backtrack a lot, which becomes a slog. On the whole, Bit Kid's randomized structure undoes so much of what Chasm has going for it, and it drained my enthusiasm for seeing what was around the next corner, because I knew it was just another random chamber.

Chasm is full of great platforming moments and environments, but these elements are randomly assembled into an uneven experience. Bit Kid succeeded in creating a Metroid-style experience that unfolds in a new way every time you play it, but I would have rather had one playthrough that was consistently entertaining. » **Ben Reeves**



Dead Cells

One of the best roguelikes to date

gameinformer GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Motion Twin **Developer** Motion Twin **Release** August 7 **Rating** E10+

Designed as a side-scrolling roguelike with heavy inspiration drawn from the Castlevania games, Dead Cells brilliantly squashes any frustration that arises from death with reassurances that most of the work the player puts in before their final breath adds up to something meaningful. The next run will be better because of the time and effort put into the last. This boost of confidence makes Dead Cells a dangerous game, as I continually found myself saying "just one more run." As the clock turned from night to early morning and I made more gains in weapons, perks, and areas to explore, I didn't want to put the game down.

In the opening seconds of play, you learn Dead Cells' nameless protagonist is designed to handle failure well. For reasons unexplained, he has recently perished, and you get to witness his resurrection. He walks again, but only one thing is different: His head is missing. That vital space is now occupied by a swirling vortex of fire and smoke that can consume cells from other living things. His mission from this moment forward is to kill demons and devour their cells to become more powerful. When he dies, he goes back to square one, but the cells he earned carry on.

That's it for the story, and while the world's strange foes and locations call for explanation, the brevity of narrative works. You don't need to know who this guy is or where he's going. Your only hope is that he did enough with his last life to reawaken with a better sword or an extra health flask.

The focus of the entire experience is on the pursuit of power, which is glorious. Developer Motion Twin wastes no time placing you on the hunting trail, which unfolds across sprawling, procedurally generated areas occupied with heavy enemy resistance. These foes range from slugs with pointy teeth to aggressive knights who will strike you down if you so much as pause for a second. The adversaries are well-designed in that their weaknesses are easy to exploit if you are on your game, but can be a handful if you screw up in any way. They all have unique behaviors and tells, and when jumbled together with other foes, take on whole new identities and may need to be addressed in different ways.

How exactly you approach encounters changes with each run, as the weapons and items you find are random. In one playthrough, your best bet may be a slow-slicing broadsword. In another run, you may rely on a powerful crossbow. The modifiers attached to said weapons can completely change the way you play. One modifier may reward bonus damage if the crossbow's arrows are shot upward, whereas the broadsword could give you a 175-percent damage boost if the target is frozen – which means you want to hunt down a freeze spell, or modify a grenade to shower ice when it explodes. The expansive inventory of weapons is fun to explore, and even more enjoyable to wield. Each brings something different, and figuring out how they complement other gadgets is part of the fun. Once you find a lethal combo, and pair it with a mutation that can amplify their boosts, you'll be stomping bosses and gaining cells like mad.

The precise controls and nimbleness of your character accommodate all the weapon types well. The backbone of the experience is basic hacking and slashing, but it feels so good, given just how precise and skill-laden it is. The character's dodge roll, stomp move, and double jump are also sewn into the mix well, both for exploration and combat. Evasion and counters are easy to execute, and you can bound across platforms with the grace of a superhero.

Some of the randomly generated level designs run into problems with long stretches leading nowhere, or two teleporters appearing practically on top of each other, but exploration is always fun and rewarding. Rare drops are littered across the adventure, and push you to perform well enough to reach a point where they are permanently added to your potential arsenal. The game's biggest problem is the time commitment it demands from players. Yes, I can see myself playing Dead Cells ad nauseam, but as more time is dedicated to it, you learn you have to grind to earn the biggest rewards, which you may need to reach the latter stages. For instance, a full day of playing is likely required to unlock the fourth health flask. That said, as the hours flew by, I continually found new things in the stages, and other Metroid-like powers that granted access to regions I didn't know existed.

Dead Cells is one of the more approachable and rewarding roguelikes I've encountered. Dying is never fun in games of this ilk, but the well-designed reward loop softens that blow and bolsters all subsequent runs, making the experience more about exploration and time committed than just player skill.

» **Andrew Reiner**

9

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC • Mac

» **Concept**
A smartly designed roguelike that continually feeds the player power to ensure progress is made

» **Graphics**
Outside of a satisfying explosion of giblets whenever a foe dies, the visuals are the one area where Dead Cells comes up short. The enemies are bit stiff in animation, and the world itself (while using the full spectrum of colors) ends up being an uneventful backdrop

» **Sound**
Appropriately ominous and backed by excellent sound effects for every action – whether it's the clanks of a chain being climbed or the moan of a foe

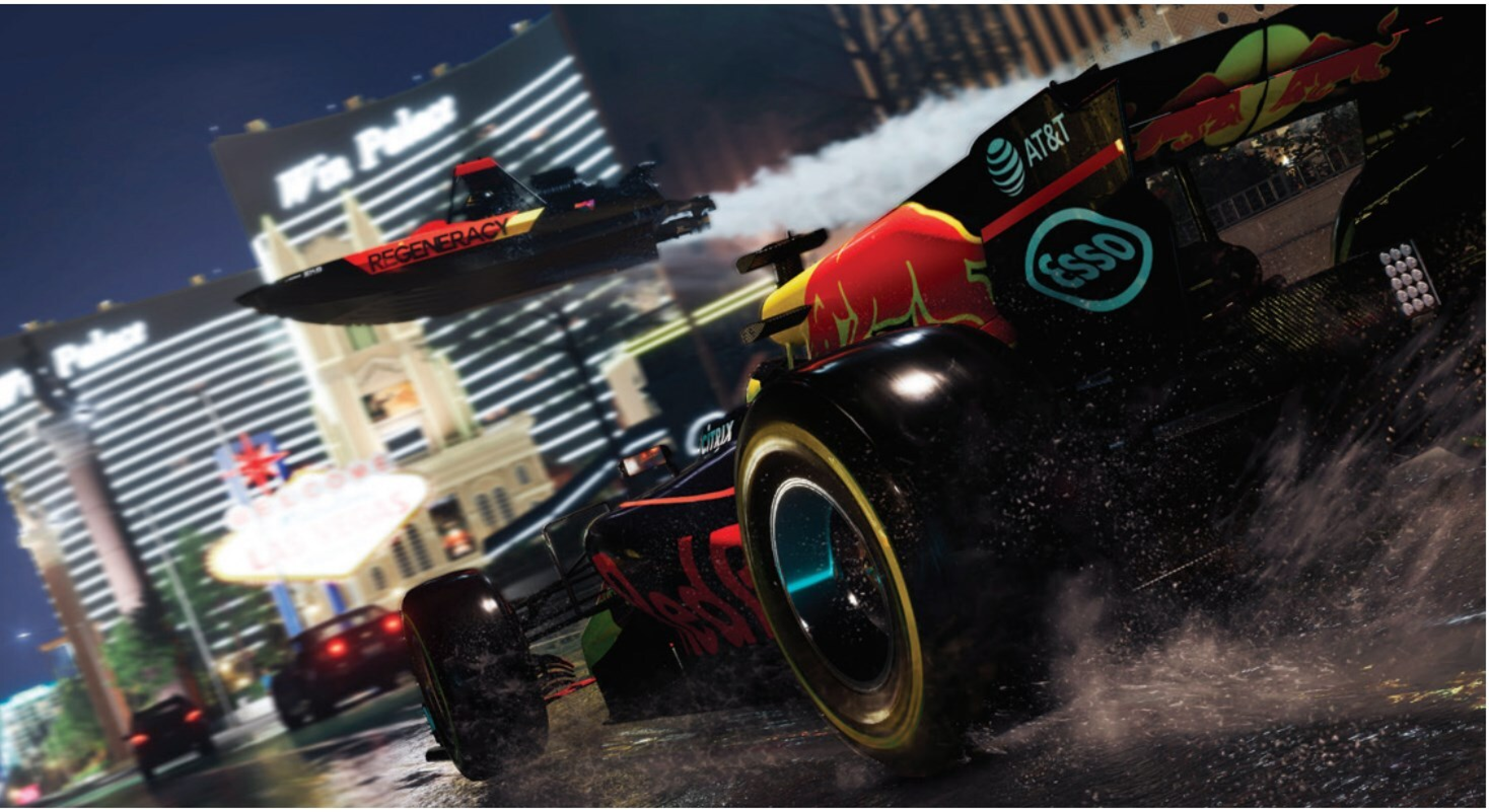
» **Playability**
Fast, fluid, and all about finding the right windows to exploit enemy weaknesses. Exploration is also fun, offering Metroid-like powers to open up new worlds, and secrets stripped right from Castlevania (anyone hungry for wall meat?)

» **Entertainment**
The reward loops are addictive and regularly open up new things for the player to explore

» **Replay Value**
High

The Crew 2

Lost in America



6

Style 1-Player Racing (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ivory Tower **Release** June 29 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Give players a large map of America to race across via different vehicles, events, and in-world challenges

» Graphics
The glow of night, sheen of dusk, and brightness of day not only look nice, but can challenge your racing vision (for better and worse)

» Sound
A variety of voiceover characters talk at you with a condescending, frenemy tone

» Playability
Each vehicle has its own handling quirks, though the racing itself is forgiving

» Entertainment
Other than brief moments, no part of The Crew 2 is captivating enough, including the rubberband-based gameplay, the events themselves, and the overall setup of the open world

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Like some American lives, The Crew 2 experience basically amounts to being bored, frustrated, and wanting to get the hell out of Florida. This sequel gives you various ways of racing across the country, but it counters this freedom with limited gameplay and the feeling that this isn't really the land of opportunity. Like the first game, developer Ivory Tower's vision of America is not one that captures the imagination.

The Crew 2 has no shortage of things to do. With plenty of events to tackle, you earn reputation and money to take on rivals in specific racing disciplines. Planes and boats are new for The Crew 2, offering their own gameplay nuances such as learning not to scrub off speed while turning in a boat. However, you can go long stretches without coming across an event or an environmental skill challenge. After a while, I didn't use the map at all, I went from race to race via the pause menu since I didn't want to drive everywhere with the chance of nothing happening along the way. The police cars and landmarks of the original game have been removed, which exacerbates the feeling that there's not a lot going on. I miss the landmarks in particular, since they rewarded exploration while offering a flavor of the surroundings. A photo mode alerts you of pictures you can take of animals, but I stopped doing these since it isn't fun creeping along slowly trying to find the creatures.

The story is the barest of setups, and it doesn't curate the experience to offer choice moments on a platter. While the freedom to race a larger selection of events at any one time is an improvement, I quickly realized that throwing the doors open to the whole country isn't as fulfilling as it may seem, since The Crew 2 doesn't have much compelling content within.

Despite the game's overall will to uninspire, it still has some fun spots. Interestingly, these were freeform moments outside of the basic races, hopping sand dunes in a buggy or bouncing from crest to crest in a speedboat. But these flashes are simple and fleeting, and the majority of events and random skill challenges struggle to hold your attention either because of aggressive rubberbanding, lack of difficulty, or uninteresting layouts. I like flying planes, but you can only be asked to do so many barrel rolls before they lose meaning. A checkpoint race that brags you can use your imagination to get from gate-to-gate doesn't do much good if it funnels you into a single path before a checkpoint.

Multiplayer should be a way to fill the gaps, but The Crew 2 has no PvP at launch (only leaderboards), and provides no compelling reason to team up with friends to defeat an event since you're off in your own areas and don't need each other to complete the event. Similarly, the game fails to connect players meaningfully or add to its world, despite its title, because you can't spawn spontaneous in-world challenges, and your friends are not part of a larger organization to bind together all you've done. The consequence is even your friends feel like acquaintances barely relevant to the experience.

In what I can only assume was an unintentional parallel, progressing in The Crew 2 depends on getting enough social media followers to up your reputation to unlock new tiers of events so you can do it all over again. Jumping through all these hoops for other people's amusement (but not my own) is a hollow purpose – a kind of vain attempt for validation that quickly grows thin.

» Matthew Kato

Dauntless

A prosaic peak

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** Phoenix Labs **Developer** Phoenix Labs **Release** May 24 **Rating** NA

Dauntless wears its Monster Hunter inspiration on its sleeve. This fantastical ride revolves around fighting monsters in confrontations that can last a few minutes or almost half an hour, with significant degrees of difficulty and rewards. You go out to battle a beast, then return home to craft new gear; like Monster Hunter, that entertaining loop propels you through Dauntless. Because it's a live service, the prospect of an infinitely expanding experience distinguishes Dauntless from Capcom's series (developer Phoenix Labs has already announced an expansion), though how that unfolds remains to be seen. Regardless of the game Dauntless eventually becomes, its current form is a welcoming banquet for a voracious new wave of monster hunters.

Dauntless' core progression is seductive, even if the missions and maps are threadbare in terms of tasks. It's all monster slaying, all the time. Pick a weapon and go start smashing monsters, break off some pieces, come back to down and forge new and powerful gear. Combat is fluid, simple, and accessible; I appreciate how the weapons have straightforward movesets, but also leave high skill ceilings for mastery. New players can gravitate toward easy-to-use swords and chain blades, while seasoned hunters may choose heavy-hitting (but timing-critical) weapons like the axe or war pike.

All the weapons are fun to try, but the hammer and the axe are the most enticing, as you can really feel the impact of each massive swing, leading to big staggers and broken chunks of monster bits. Each weapon is unique, but Dauntless only has a small selection of them, and the essential combinations are few and easy to learn. While this works well for onboarding new players, the lack of options dulls the experience over time.

Outside of weapons, armor, and consumables, you can augment your gear with cores that provide various boosts and abilities. Creating sets of gear with powerful bonuses – like the chance to deal double damage, or the ability to revive an ally with full health instead of a fraction – is incredibly satisfying. You can feel the weight of each new tier and choice as you take on behemoth after behemoth.

You can dance around the flames of giant turtles, avoid the deadly tail of a mutant beaver, and find the squishy core of a rock-ensconced foe. Whatever you're fighting, you need to learn and adapt. Battles are more complex than simply dodging a behemoth's standard attacks. Learning how to "boop" an enemy during certain animations and knock them down, interrupting dangerous attacks and getting a large window of opportunity, is enjoyable and allows you to take on tougher monsters with experience and skill. Later encounters task you with dodging at the disco as an immense laser bug showers the sky with beams, and fighting under a cloud of darkness as the behemoth hunts its prey unseen.

While some behemoths are recycled across difficulty tiers, various tweaks and changes to their abilities keep them interesting and fresh. One monster lays down structures that fire deadly projectiles, and hunters need to destroy and manage these electrified blasters. A later version of the same monster drops the same defenses, but they're shielded – so this time you need to bat their projectiles back.

The cycle of collecting, building, and customizing is great all the way to the end. At that point, things change. Dauntless' endgame offers players a new type of loot to collect, rare recipes that provide insane bonuses that break all the rules (like resurrecting after death for a few incredibly powerful vengeful blows). However, the true top end of the game is currently limited to two challenging monster encounters. Both these fights are awesome to learn and master, but after you've brought them both down 20 times or so, even hoping for those amazing exotic drops doesn't provide enough incentive to hop back in for another round.

As a live service, developer Phoenix Labs could address the scarcity of content for advanced players in the future, but that possibility doesn't excuse the missteps in the current version of the game. Dauntless is a great foundation for a rollicking monster-mashing time, but without the critical component of a compelling endgame, your journey has no satisfying destination. Only time will tell if the swirling islands around Ramsgate can provide something more. » **Daniel Tack**

8

PC

» **Concept**
Take on a variety of behemoths that threaten the safety of the Shattered Isles while amassing a stockpile of weapons, armor, and augmentations

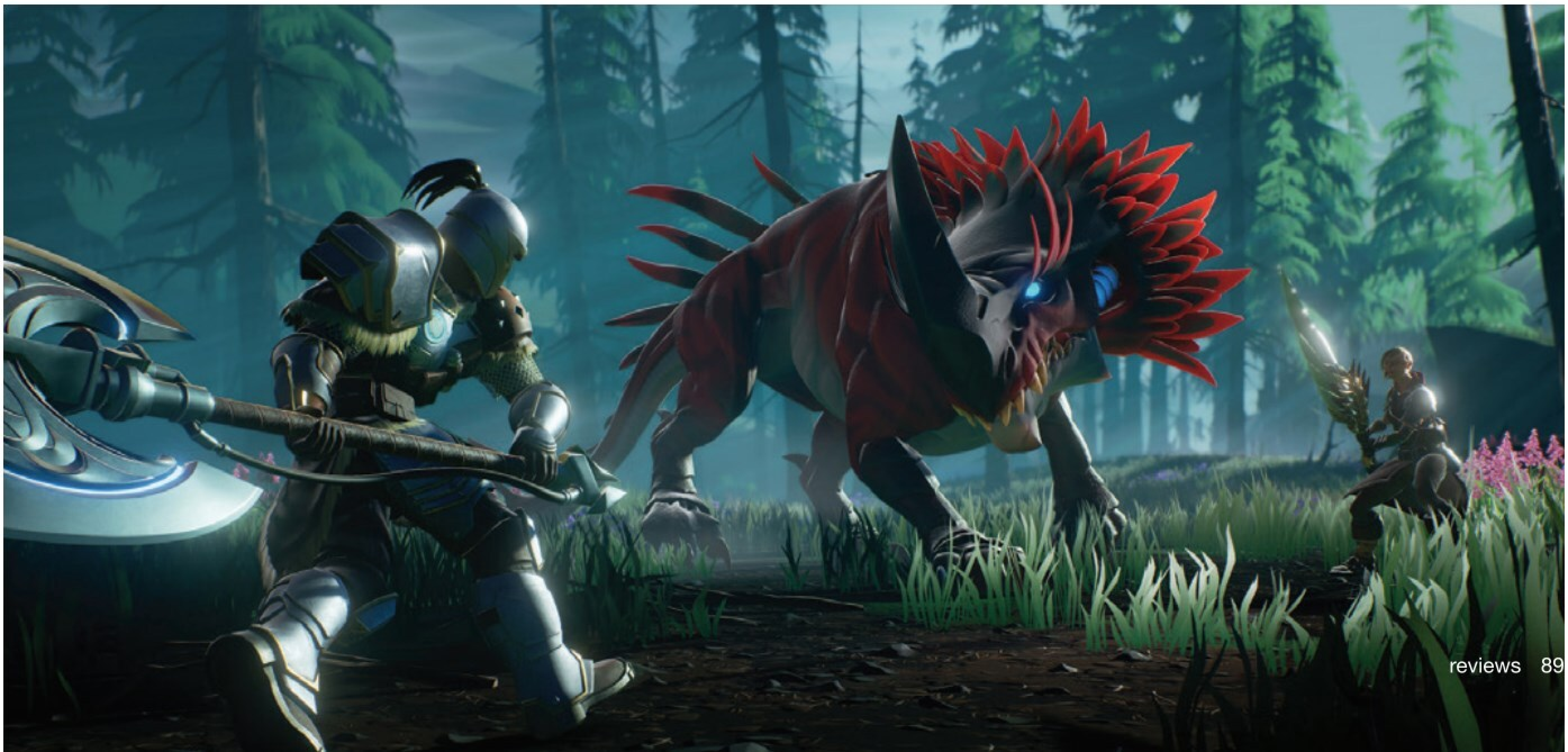
» **Graphics**
Colorful and cartoony graphics convey a stylized, whimsical world

» **Sound**
A stirring score adds a bit of a bump to uninspiring sound effects

» **Playability**
Dauntless ramps up to difficult encounters slowly with plenty of "tutorial time" and dripped unlocks, perfect for those unsure of their monster-slaying prowess

» **Entertainment**
A satisfying progression loop makes it easy to get sucked in, but the endgame is tedious and tiresome

» **Replay Value**
High



Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker

Nintendo recuts a semiprecious stone

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Puzzle/Platforming **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** July 13 **Rating** E

Switch • 3DS

» Concept
Add a few small additions to Toad's treasure-filled Wii U adventure through a series of single-screen dioramas

» Graphics
Captain Toad's cutesy graphics remain simple, but the Switch version gets a bump up to 1080p

» Sound
The easy, upbeat tunes get the job done, but this is a perfect game to play while listening to a podcast

» Playability
You can easily play with only the two thumbsticks – one to move Toad around and one to move the camera. Unfortunately, you must occasionally use motion controls to interact with the world, which isn't ideal

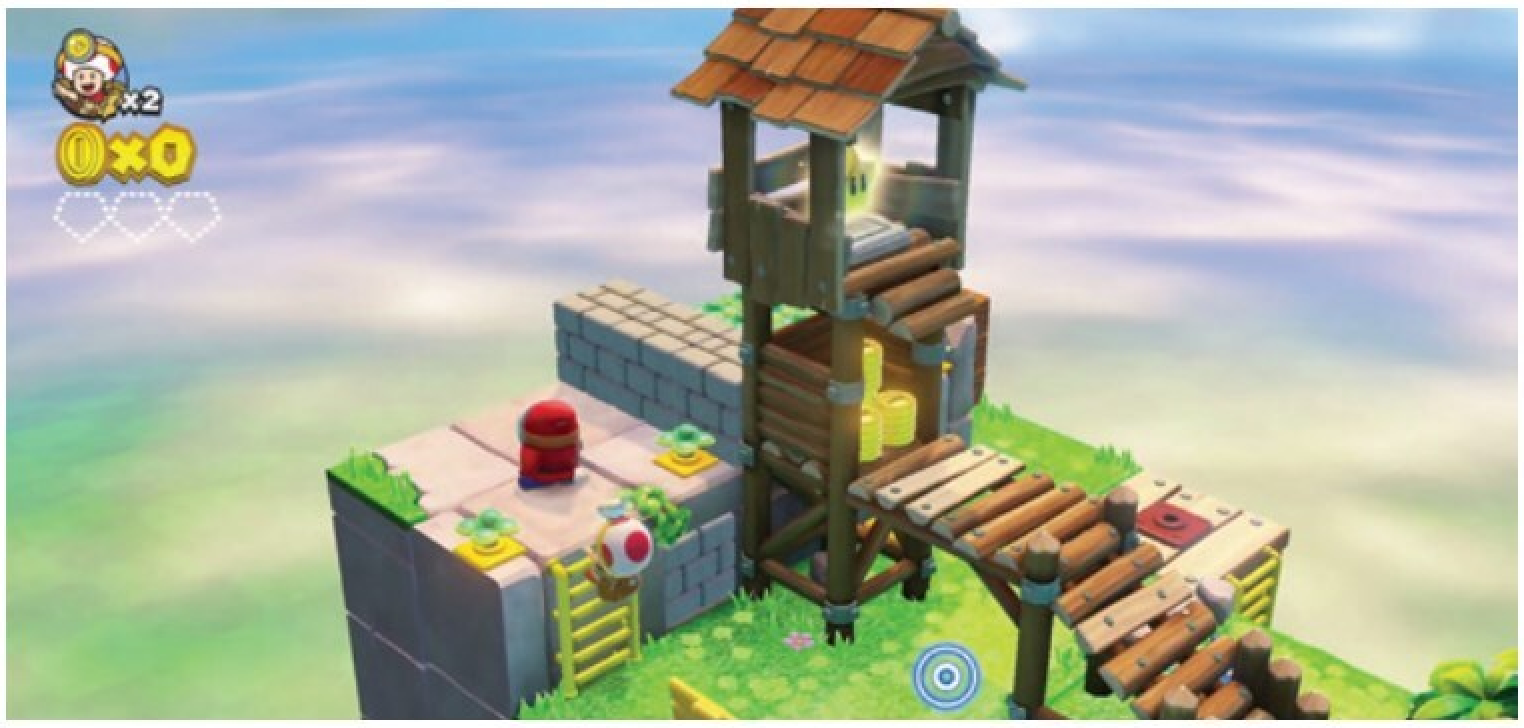
» Entertainment
Captain Toad's treasure laden levels are bite-sized, stress-free puzzles packed with surprises

» Replay Value
Moderately high

The software lineup for the Switch's second year doesn't measure up to its blockbuster opening year. Fortunately, Nintendo still has a volume of critical hits that launched on the underperforming Wii U to help pad out a thin release calendar. Titles like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze are robust ports of their Wii U counterparts. This rerelease of Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker isn't filled with nearly as many new goodies, but it remains a delightful romp for anyone who missed this treasure hunt the first time around.

I first fell in love with Captain Toad's quirky diorama-like adventures in Super Mario 3D World. I adored helping the mushroom-topped hero dodge traps and enemies in a series of single-screen levels while hunting for rare treasures. When Nintendo expanded on this concept with a stand-alone adventure, I happily joined the expedition. Each level only took around five to ten minutes, and the bite-sized sequences were refreshingly free of fluff. Captain Toad's levels aren't challenging, but I discovered a peaceful joy in rotating the camera around each level as I shifted around the pieces of each environment like they were miniature puzzle boxes.

Bizarrely, this Switch version removes a handful of levels based on Super Mario 3D World's environments. In their place, we get an entire bonus chapter of new levels based on the worlds in Super Mario Odyssey. This is more than a fair trade, because these new levels are some of the best in the game. I got a thrill at seeing my favorite worlds from Super Mario Odyssey again while helping Toad dodge Bullet Bills atop an upside down Pyramid, or finding a way to power the moving lifts underneath New Donk City. I just wish these new levels were available from the start; fans of the original release must play through most of the game again to unlock them, unless they have access to the Super Mario Odyssey wedding Amiibos.



Since Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker originally launched on Wii U, it made full use of the Wii U controller's touchpad, asking players to touch sections of the environment to move them around or to tap on enemies to slow them down. Sadly, this feature doesn't translate perfectly to the Switch. When the system is docked, players use their controller's motion controls to move a cursor across the screen, which acts as a stand-in for your fingers. These controls feel fine, but I got tired of watching the cursor buzz across the screen like an annoying fly when I wasn't using it. Alternatively, handheld mode allows you to use the original touchscreen mechanics without a cursor, which is the ideal way to play.

Captain Toad's only other significant addition is a two-player mode. Sorry, did I say, "significant?" I meant trivial. Like many of the two-player modes in other Nintendo games, this is simply a tweak to the single player campaign, where one player controls Toad and the second player controls the camera while throwing turnips at enemies from off-screen. This is far from a destination mode, but it technically meets the back of the box requirements of allowing two players to interact with the game at the same time.

Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker was a fun time when it hit the Wii U, and it's still a fun time today. The new levels are easily some of the best in the game, but they don't really justify a second purchase. I'm thrilled Nintendo wants to make use of this well-traveled fungi, but I hope the next time I see Captain Toad, he's going on a completely new adventure. » **Ben Reeves**

This review pertains to the Switch version of Captain Toad: Treasure Tracker. It is also available on 3DS

Octopath Traveler

An arduous but rewarding journey

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Square Enix, Acquire **Release** July 13 **Rating** T

At its best, Octopath Traveler reminds me of my favorite 16-bit role-playing games. Strategic turn-based combat tests your skills, a job system gives you the freedom to tinker and optimize, and a fantastic retro aesthetic brings the world and creatures to life. However, Octopath Traveler isn't always at its best. Over the course of its 60-plus hours, the adventure has wild variations in pacing and narrative, and has trouble settling into a groove. The result is a series of tantalizing highs and brutal lows, with the highs ultimately winning out.

Octopath Traveler's problems take a long time to surface. The early hours are amazing, with the dreamlike presentation and 2D/3D hybrid visuals drawing you in. After choosing one of eight characters as your hero, you visit other towns to recruit the seven others. In every case, you play through a vignette (which lasts about an hour) that introduces the hero and their quest – a thief needs to steal jewels to salvage his pride, while a cleric embarks on a religious pilgrimage. This structure is unconventional and intriguing at first, but it doesn't stay that way for long.

In subsequent chapters, the narrative squanders its potential through dull repetition. Each character has four chapters (32 in total), and almost all of those follow the exact same formula: Arrive in town, watch a scene, use a character-specific ability to accomplish a minor task like stealing a letter, then go into a short dungeon and fight a boss. I was often interested in the stories being told on a conceptual level (especially Primrose's quest for revenge), but the predictable format and writing saps them of their surprises. Every character is exactly who they appear to be, and every betrayal and plot twist is immediately apparent. That doesn't necessarily make them bad stories, but it makes them feel unremarkable.

The eight main heroes rarely interact or acknowledge each other, and their tales never converge to unite the group in any common purpose. This approach does a good job putting specific characters in the spotlight with vignettes tailored to their personalities and strengths, but results in a disappointing lack of comradery or cooperation among party members. They're just strangers who fight together sometimes.

Combat is Octopath Traveler's great redeeming force. The battles are fun and tactical, focused on coordinating your attacks to break an enemy's defense to create the opening for an onslaught. This means carefully planning your attacks using the action queue, exploiting weaknesses, and reserving boost points for critical moments. I like how each character has access to a unique suite of abilities, like how H'aanit the hunter tames animals, or how Alfyn the apothecary mixes concoctions. This largely avoids redundant skills and ensures every character has an interesting role to occupy. Your foes don't pull punches, so fights provide a satisfying challenge. This is especially true of the boss fights, which often inject twists like disabling the attack command or draining your max HP every turn to apply pressure, forcing you to develop new strategies. In addition, these adversaries look uniformly fantastic; even a regular human boss becomes a stylish and imposing pixel-art masterpiece.

Behind the scenes, a compelling job system gives your characters the flexibility they need to succeed. Once you unlock them, you can assign and swap secondary jobs as needed. This provides your party access to additional weapons, helps them shore up stat weaknesses, and allows them to learn new passive skills they can equip regardless of their current job, like breaking the 9,999 damage limit or decreasing enemy-encounter rate. I loved experimenting with these possibilities (and hunting for the advanced secondary jobs), and the need to rotate party members prevents you from getting entrenched with a single configuration.

As much as I enjoyed the battle system, it doesn't always feel fresh. After you finish one set of vignettes, your party probably won't be strong enough to access the new content. The only solution is to spend hours fighting the same monsters until you have enough experience to survive the next story chapters. This concept is an ancient relic of RPG design, and many fans have made peace with it, but that doesn't make it fun. The grinding bloats Octopath Traveler and wastes your time, but once you're past it, the frustration quickly abates as you renew your focus on what the game does well.

Octopath Traveler almost feels like a game from an alternate timeline – one in which titles like Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy VI gave rise to a continuing lineage of RPGs that never strayed far from their 16-bit roots. Yes, Octopath Traveler occasionally adheres too closely to antiquated ideas, but with its retro charm and inventive combat, it also takes exciting leaps you won't see anywhere else. » **Joe Juba**

8

Switch

» Concept
Drawing heavy inspiration from the era of 16-bit RPGs, Octopath Traveler follows eight separate stories bolstered by strategic turn-based battles and gorgeous visuals

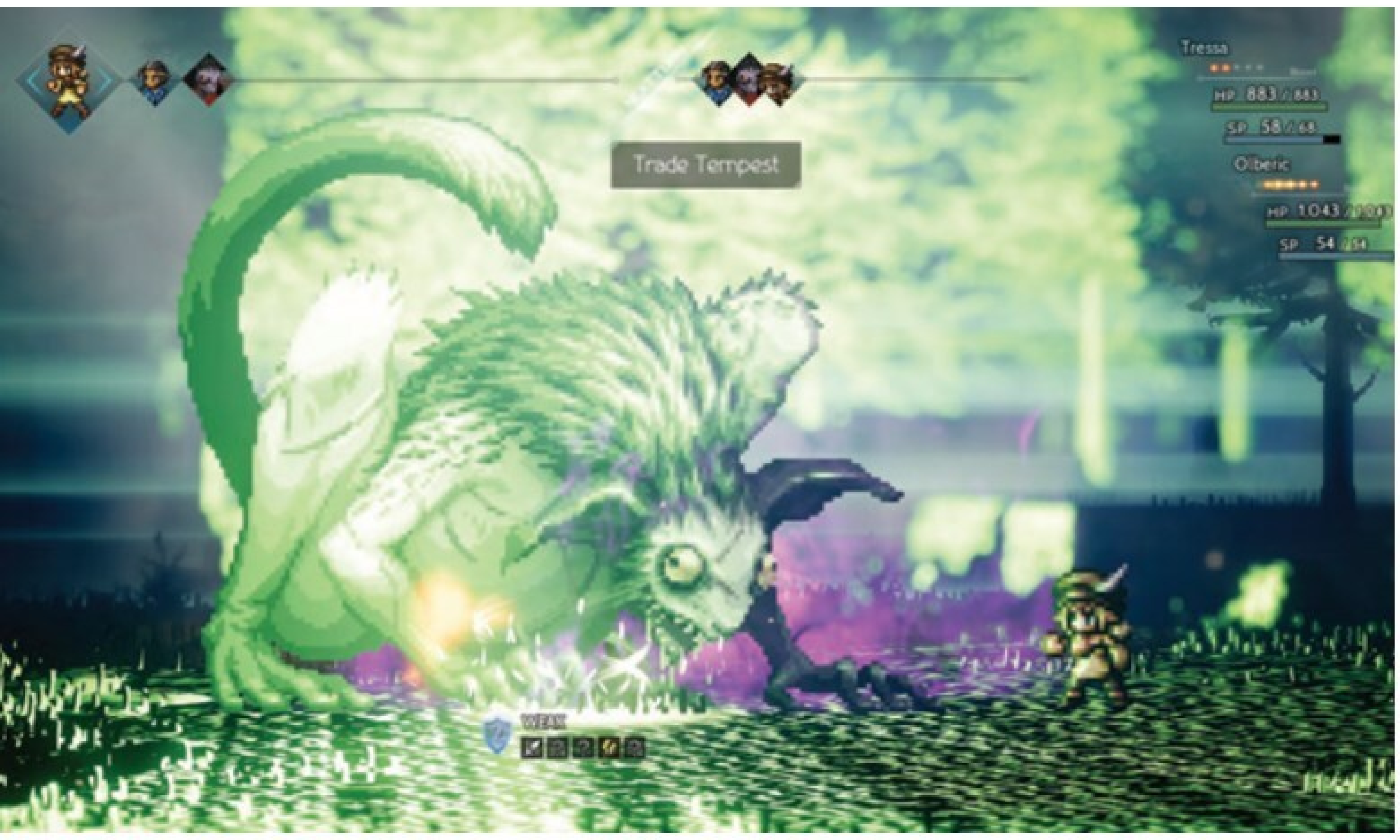
» Graphics
Lovely 2D pixel art presented in 3D makes the world feel like a diorama. The monster and boss designs are especially amazing

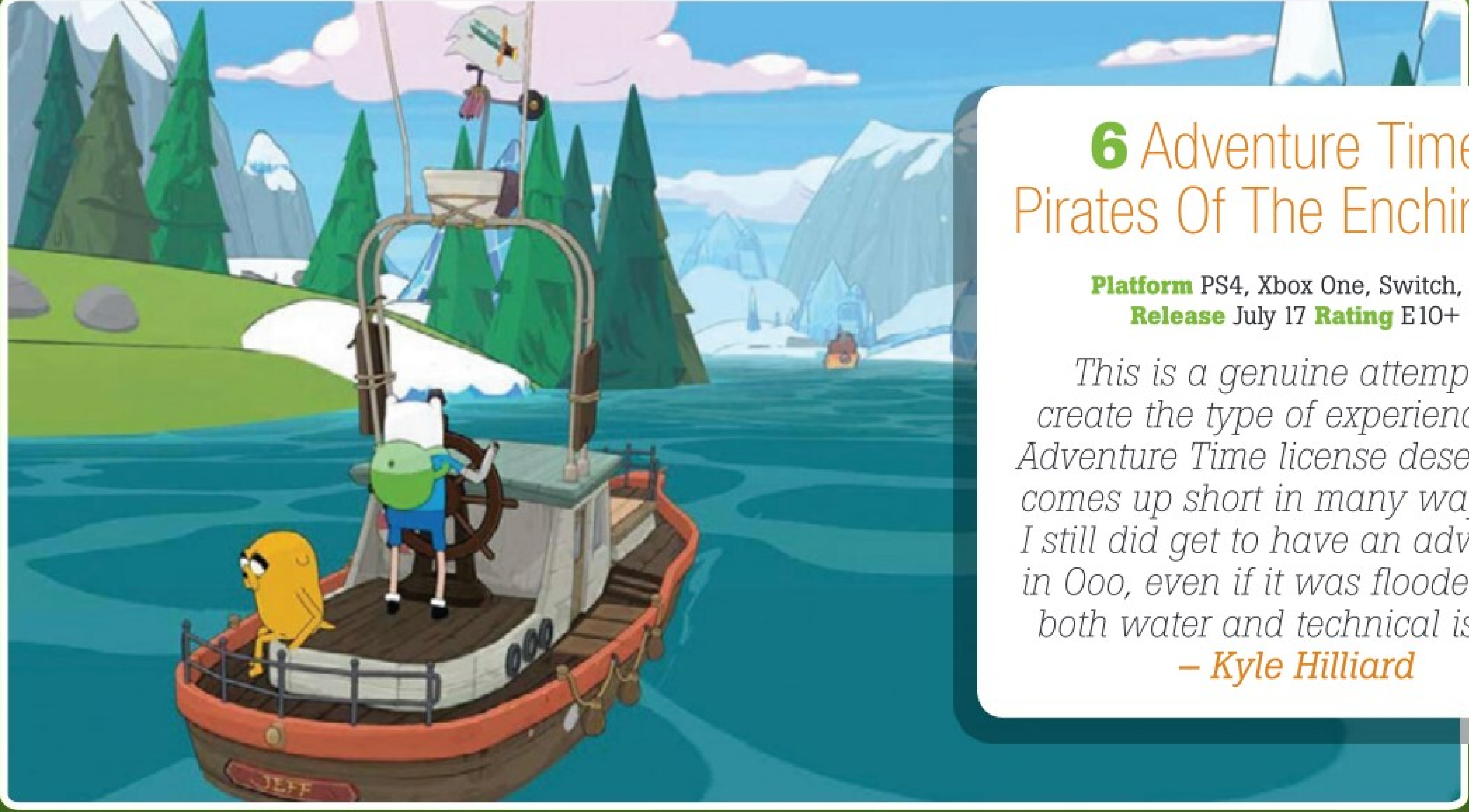
» Sound
The music is pleasant, even though only a few tracks truly stand out. However, inconsistent voice acting (both in quality and quantity) is an issue

» Playability
Straightforward controls make it easy to fight and explore. Managing equipment and jobs for your eight characters can be inelegant, but it isn't a major problem

» Entertainment
Combat is the highlight of the adventure. The stories unfolding between encounters are uneven, and the grinding required to progress is a frustrating roadblock

» Replay Value
Moderate





6 Adventure Time: Pirates Of The Enchiridion

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
Release July 17 **Rating** E10+

This is a genuine attempt to create the type of experience the Adventure Time license deserves. It comes up short in many ways, but I still did get to have an adventure in Ooo, even if it was flooded with both water and technical issues. *– Kyle Hilliard*

8.5 Prey: Mooncrash

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** June 10 **Rating** M

Arkane Studios excels at creating fun, inventive playgrounds in which players are given a bevy of tools that wreak havoc and create memorable moments. In that regard, Mooncrash ranks among the developer's strongest offerings. – Javy Gwaltney

5 Earthfall

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC
Release July 13 **Rating** T

Earthfall just isn't fun. The game has a solid foundation but that structure doesn't hold anything that's entertaining or interesting enough to merit the effort of playing it, especially when there are already several superior games that inhabit the same subgenre. – Javy Gwaltney

7 Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle – Donkey Kong Adventure

Platform Switch **Release** June 26 **Rating** E10+

Donkey Kong Adventure adequately recaptures the same lighthearted irreverence and manic battles of the base game, but as much as I still enjoy the combat, simply offering more of the same feels a little late at this point. – Jeff Marchiafava

8.5 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

Platform Switch **Release** June 29 **Rating** M

Even the worst version of The New Colossus is an incredible, must-play game for anyone who loves zany action and honest, powerful stories about the cost of hope. *– Javy Gwaltney*

8.5 Splatoon 2: Octo Expansion

Platform Switch **Release** July 13 **Rating** E10+

Brimming with tense, precision-based challenges and creative ways to force you out of your gameplay comfort zone, Octo Expansion is a terrific reason to once again take the plunge into Splatoon 2. – Brian Shea

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The Court will hold a Fairness Hearing in the Circuit Court of Phelps County, Missouri, 200 N Main Street, Rolla, MO 65401, on October 24, 2018 at 9:00 a.m., to decide whether to approve the settlement and to award attorneys' fees and expenses of up to $1,000,000, and $3,000 per Class Representative award, not to exceed $15,000. The motion for fees and expenses will be posted on the website below after they are filed. You may attend this hearing, but you don't have to.

This is only a summary. For complete information, including how to file a claim, visit the settlement website www.CandyProductsSettlement.com or call 1-844-271-4788.

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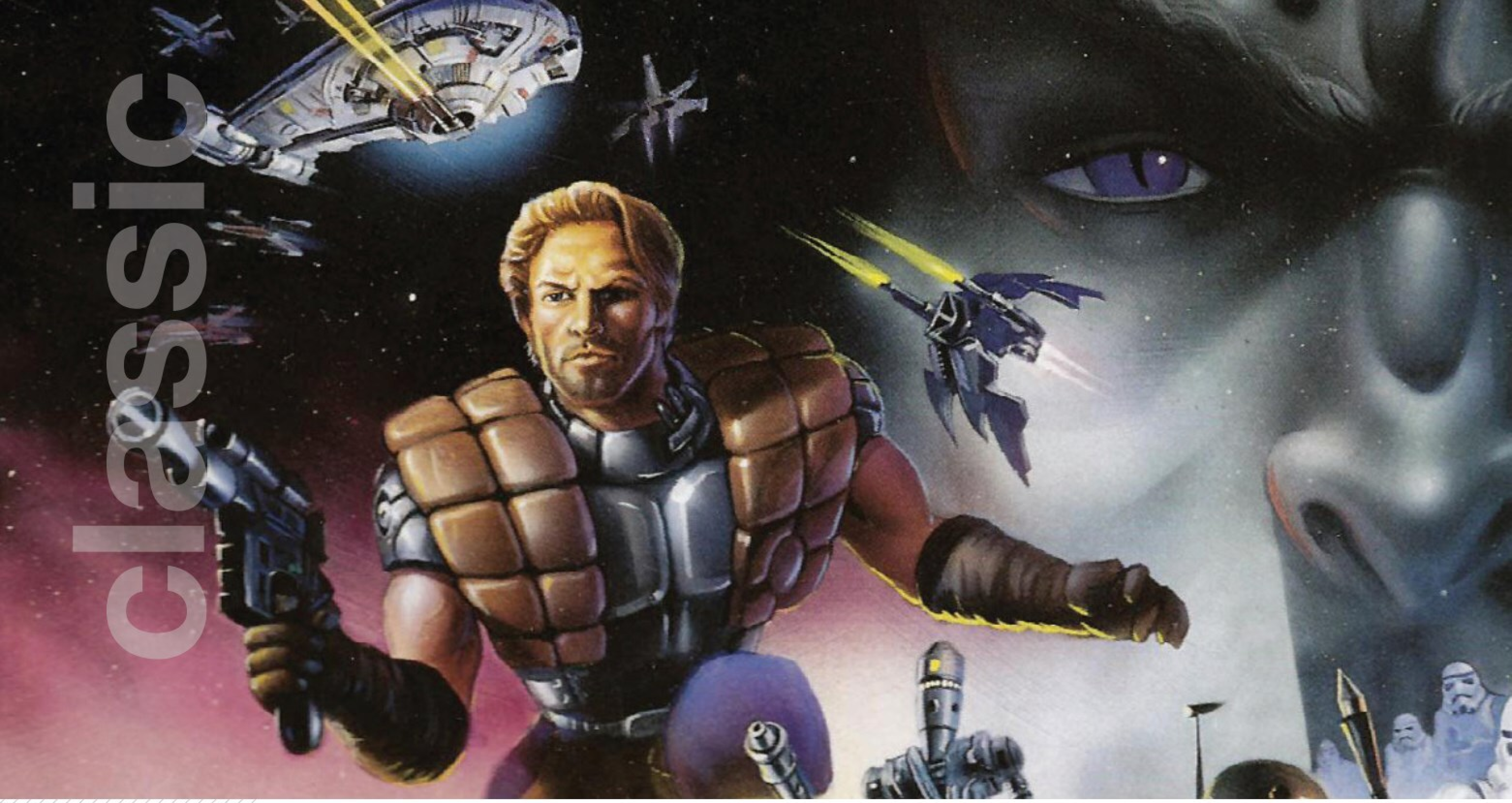


STAR WARS: SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

Remembering Star Wars' most audacious video game adaptation

by Kyle Hilliard

In 1996, right before the special editions of the original Star Wars trilogy released in theaters, and three years before *The Phantom Menace*, one Star Wars story tried to make an impact without the aid of an accompanying film. Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire was LucasArts' attempt to tell the story between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* across multiple types of media, and one of its pillars was a video game. Shadows of the Empire marked a direct collaboration between Star Wars and Nintendo, helped launch the N64, and suffered as a result of its undeniable hubris. Despite all this, the game is one of the earliest examples of a 3D, third-person action game, and it holds a special place in the hearts of young-at-the-time Star Wars fans.

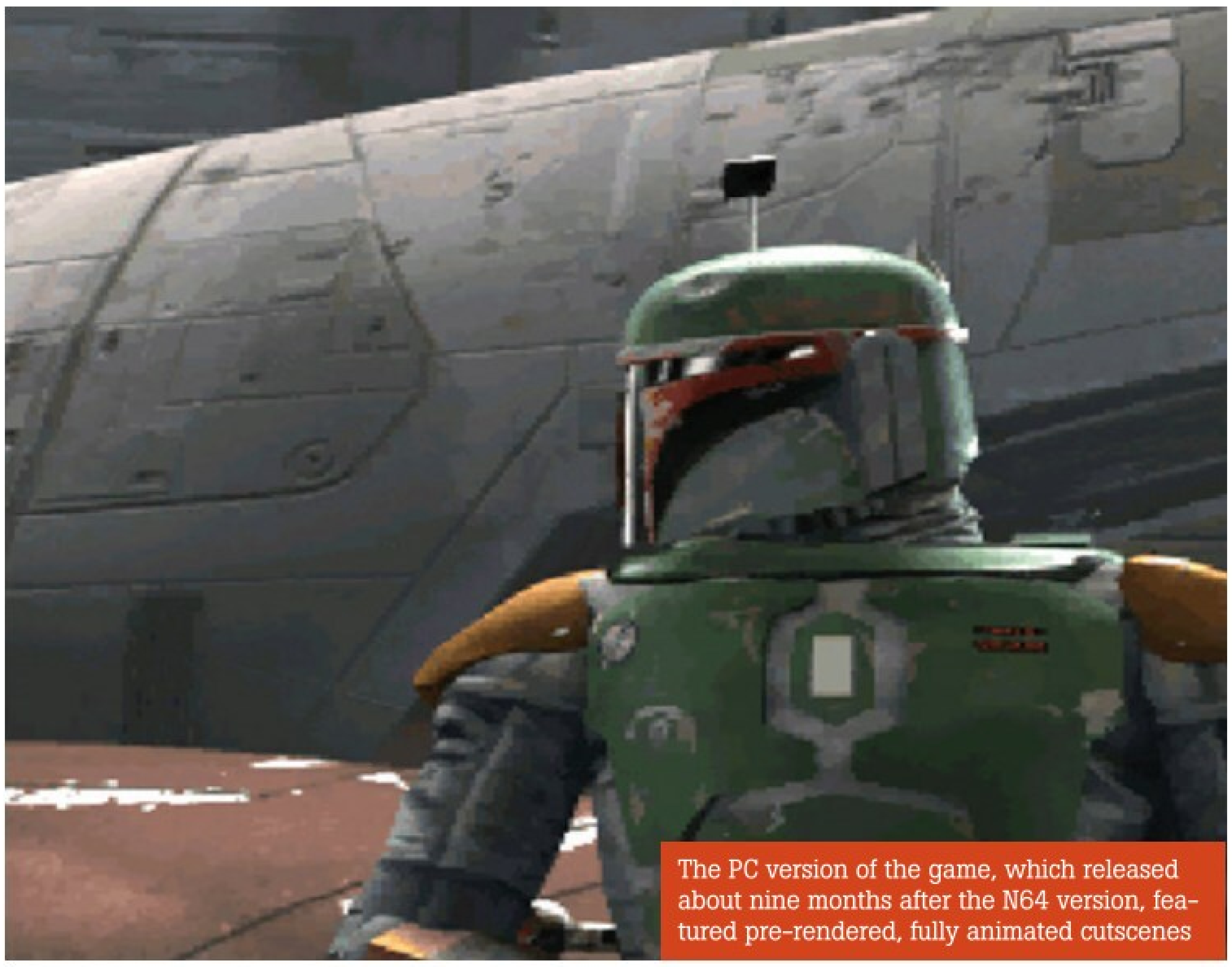
Jon Knoles works on the Forza series with Microsoft today, but early in his video game career he worked on what many would consider to be the dream license. Between doing art for the NES Star Wars in 1991 and doing some work on the 2005 Revenge of the Sith game, Knoles worked on 24 Star Wars video games. His first project lead role was on Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire for the N64.

The earliest version of the game wasn't a Star Wars game. After working on the Super Star Wars action/platformers and the TIE Fighter and X-Wing flight games, Knoles wanted to do something different. "We decided to take a break from Star Wars, so we started kicking around this idea of a western with this new machine we heard Nintendo was making," Knoles says. His team was experimenting with the new world of 3D graphics, specifically trying to place a player on a moving train.

A New Hope For Nintendo 64

Nintendo reached out to LucasArts about making a Star Wars game for its new hardware. It wanted something new with original characters that could be directly associated with its brand-new console. From there, the Shadows of the Empire multimedia experience began to come together. "I guess I was the one that came up with the time frame and the setting and the overall plot, which was to see what really happened on the way to delivering Han Solo to Jabba the Hutt," Knoles says. His original pitch was to follow Boba Fett as he was chased through the galaxy by the bounty hunters from *The Empire Strikes Back*. "That would have been an awesome game, but my directive was that it needed to be based on an original character," Knoles says.

Dark Horse ultimately delivered Knoles' original story idea following Boba Fett in a series of comics, while the *Shadows of the Empire* novel took the lead covering the interpersonal relationships between Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, and new antagonist Xizor. Knoles and his team was tasked with following Dash Rendar, a character who was supposed to be a scary space pirate serving as a stand-in for a frozen Han Solo. Knoles admits that he didn't like the character's name: "Somewhere in a box in the garage, there is probably a list of name ideas for Dash, but ultimately the novel gave him that name, so I said, 'Alright, let's just go with it.'"



The PC version of the game, which released about nine months after the N64 version, featured pre-rendered, fully animated cutscenes

Jedi Master Miyamoto

Jon Knoles worked with George Lucas on many projects, casually referring to him as simply "George" during our conversation, but Lucas didn't have much feedback for Shadows of the Empire. However, Knoles got feedback from Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto, and it wasn't all encouraging.

Miyamoto said the camera needed some work. Using Mario 64 as a reference, he said the camera should feel like a hot-air balloon tied to the character, and that's how smoothly it should move through the environment. Miyamoto was also insistent that Dash's feet always be visible. "Part of our problem, being a shooter, was the farther away you get from your character with the camera, the more inaccurate your shooting, turning, and aiming feedback becomes," Knoles says, which caused some debate. "The other bit of feedback… I'd like to think something was lost in the translation, but I swear what I heard his translator say was, when we were talking about character animation, 'Do you not to take pride in your animation?'" Knoles says, laughing. Knoles himself had done all of Dash's animation, so he took it personally. "They were right, but it was harsh feedback at the time," Knoles says. "That stung a little bit, but it was still pretty cool to meet Miyamoto."

Five Games In One

Launch (Window) Title

Shadows of the Empire's position in the Star Wars timeline was set, so when it came to making the actual game, Knoles and his team looked to what had been successful in the past. The Super Star Wars games explored multiple play styles and genres and were well-liked. "We were like, 'Hey, let's just move this to the world of 3D!'" Knoles says. "'This will be easy!' Wrong." Shadows of the Empire experimented with low-altitude flight, third-person shooting, high-speed racing, on-rails shooting, and even full space flight. "Yeah, that was my fault," Knoles says. "I would never do that again. That was too many games in one."

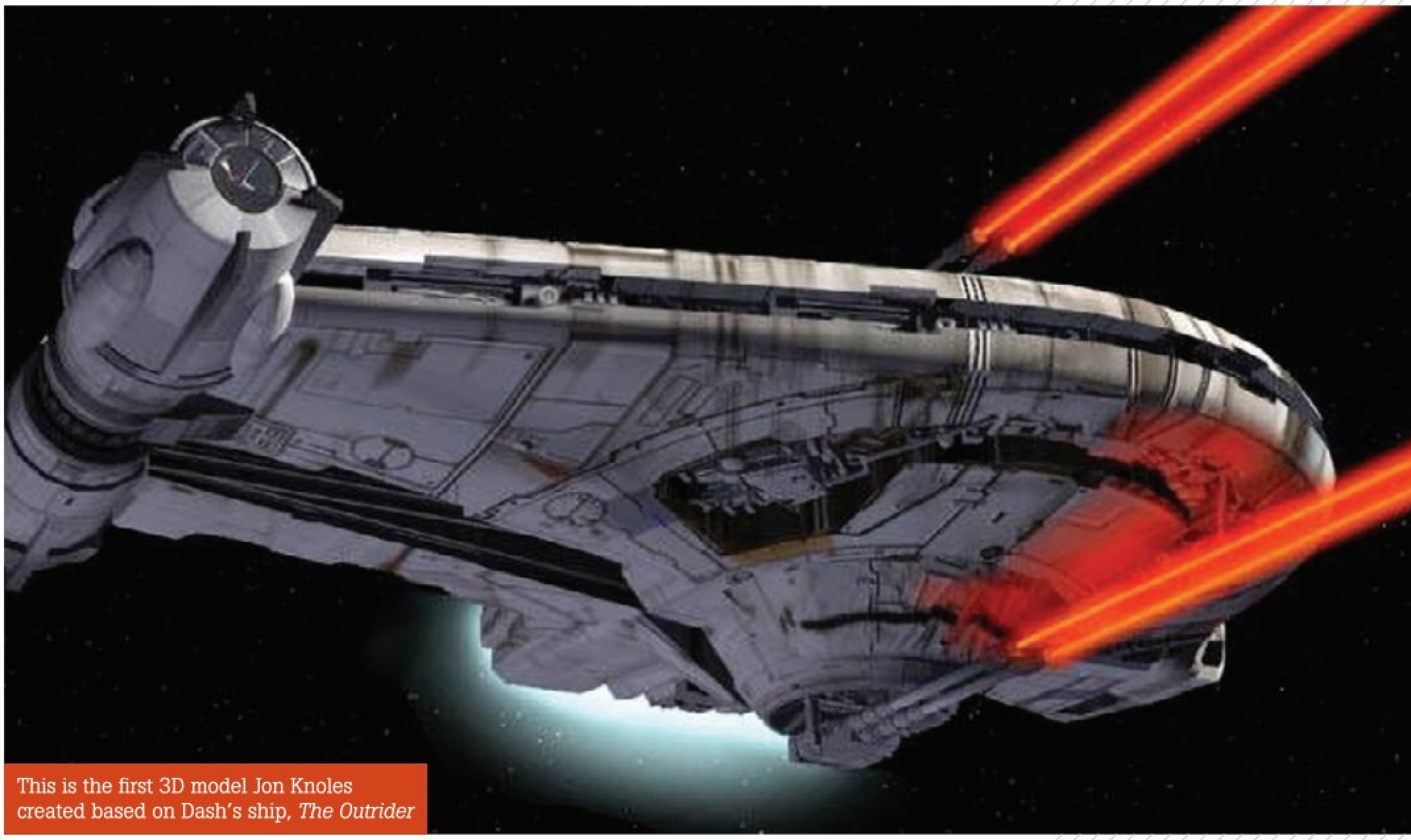
On any platform during any generation, a game as diverse as Shadows of the Empire would be difficult, but to make it even harder, Knoles and his team were also trying to figure out how to work in 3D. "What do you do with the guy's feet when you're rotating the camera to the left or to the right?" Knoles asks. "These are all things that have been figured out hundreds of times by many people since, but at the time, we were among the first two or three projects in the world trying to tackle this problem." The team didn't make the N64's launch day. The game released a few weeks after, but was on shelves for the Christmas rush.

The opening Hoth level is particularly memorable, and Knoles recalls the difficulty of trying to make a snow speeder wrap up an AT-AT with a tow cable. "We almost didn't ship with that gameplay because the programmers were telling me, 'Man, it's going to be too hard,'" Knoles says. Gall Spaceport also stands out as a massive level that rewards exploration. You begin inside of Dash's ship, the *Outrider*, and then step out into the larger world seamlessly – an impressive feat in 1996. "That was a requirement of mine. I always wanted to do that in a game," Knoles says.

The Return Of The Rendar

When it released, Shadows of the Empire was not a critical success (though *Game Informer* gave it a 9.25). Knoles describes Shadows of the Empire's reception as heartbreaking, but he still has plenty of reasons to be proud. The game has a following appreciative of its attempts to close one of Star Wars' biggest story gaps, and perhaps more importantly, the game sold very well. "It was expected to sell something like 50,000 to 60,000 units. The game easily sold 10 times that in the first year, which surprised everyone," Knoles says. "It made Lucas and Nintendo happy. The novel and the comic book and soundtrack came out at the same time so LucasFilm licensing was happy because they got to have their big multimedia event." For many young players, it served as an introduction to both Star Wars and a new Nintendo console.

In the last two years, thanks to releases on GOG and Steam, Shadows of the Empire has experienced a resurgence. "I got word from people recently saying, 'Oh I love that game!' and I say, 'Oh, I'm sorry,'" Knoles jokes. By today's standards, the game has rough edges, both literally with its limited angular art design, and figuratively in its mechanics. "I look at it now, and a lot of it really didn't age well," Knoles says. "When you get enough time to polish something, and you only do one or two things instead of five things, you can make a much better game out of it. I still have a lot of pride for it. I would just do it all differently now if I could."



This is the first 3D model Jon Knoles created based on Dash's ship, *The Outrider*

Test Your Video Game Knowledge

1. What was Joel's last name going to be in The Last of Us before Naughty Dog cut it from the game?
A. Williams
B. Miller
C. Auditore da Firenze
D. Potter

2. In the Metal Gear series, which of the following characters is related by blood to The Boss?
A. Naked Snake
B. Otacon
C. Solidus Snake
D. Revolver Ocelot

3. True or False: Due to a time-traveling adventure, Professor Layton is his own father.
A. True
B. False

4. Which of these characters is a quest-giver in Red Dead Redemption?
A. Jack Marston
B. Leander Holland
C. Aquila
D. Muriel Scranton

5. You probably just say "mechs," but what are the giant robots in Zone of the Enders really called?
A. A.G.W.S.
B. Orbital Frames
C. Exo Lifters
D. Striders

6. How many Korok Seeds can players collect in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild?
A. 255
B. 500
C. 900
D. 901

7. Which member of the Normandy crew from Mass Effect 2 does not have a loyalty mission?
A. Edi
B. Thane
C. Kasumi
D. Garrus

8. True or False? Fortnite has a co-op survival mode in addition to Battle Royale.
A. True
B. False

9. We're still waiting for the sequel, but Ubisoft's original Beyond & Evil launched in what year?
A. 2002
B. 2003
C. 2004
D. 2005

10. Which of the following gods does Kratos not kill in God of War III?
A. Hades
B. Helios
C. Morpheus
D. Poseidon

11. Developer Sucker Punch Productions is known for Sly Cooper, Infamous, and the upcoming Ghost of Tsushima. What is the name of studio's first game that released on Nintendo 64?
A. Croc: Legend of the Gobbos
B. Rocket: Robot on Wheels
C. Space Station Silicon Valley
D. Glover

Answers 1:B, 2:D, 3:B 4:A, 5:B, 6:C, 7:A, 8:A, 9:B, 10:C, 11:B

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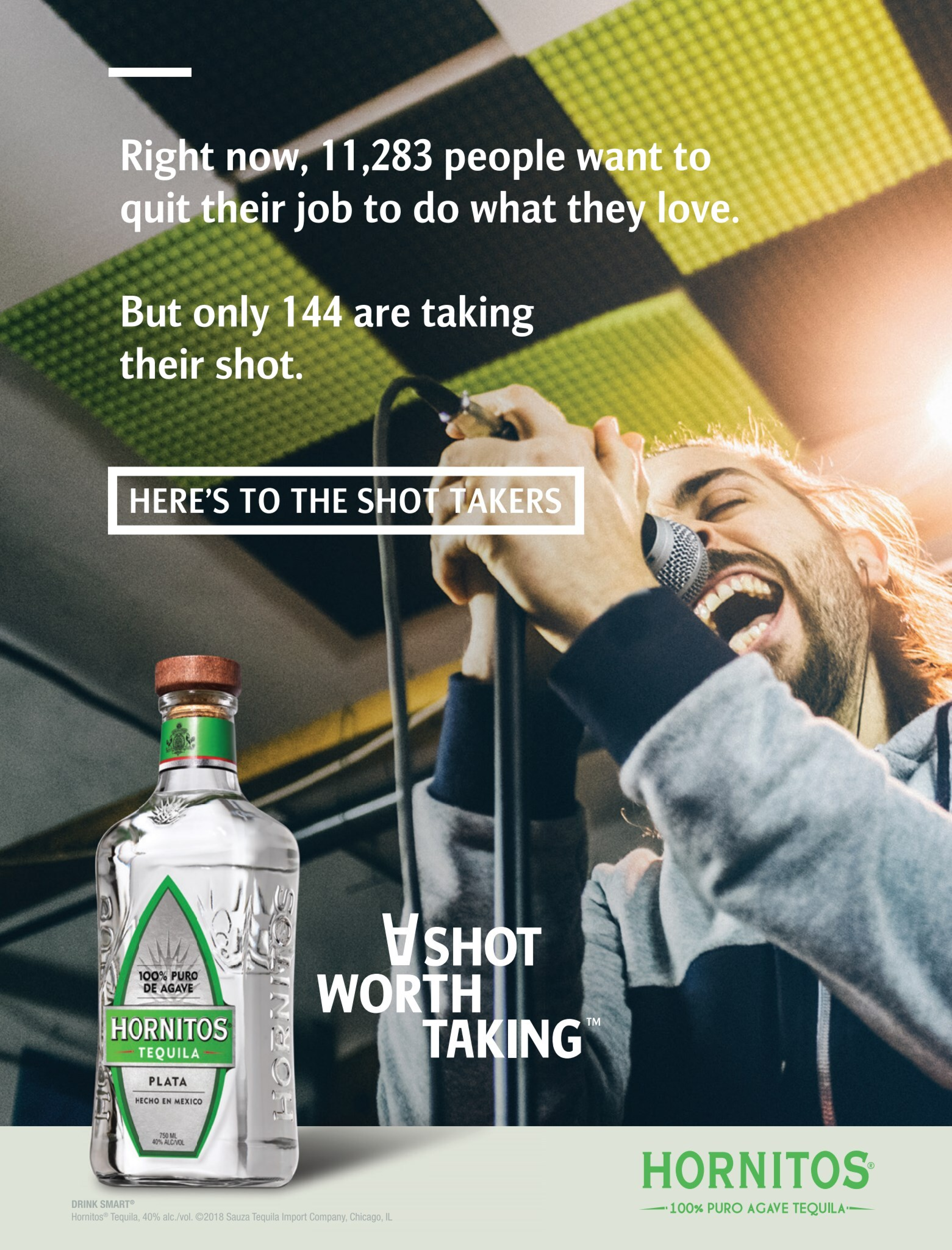

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